



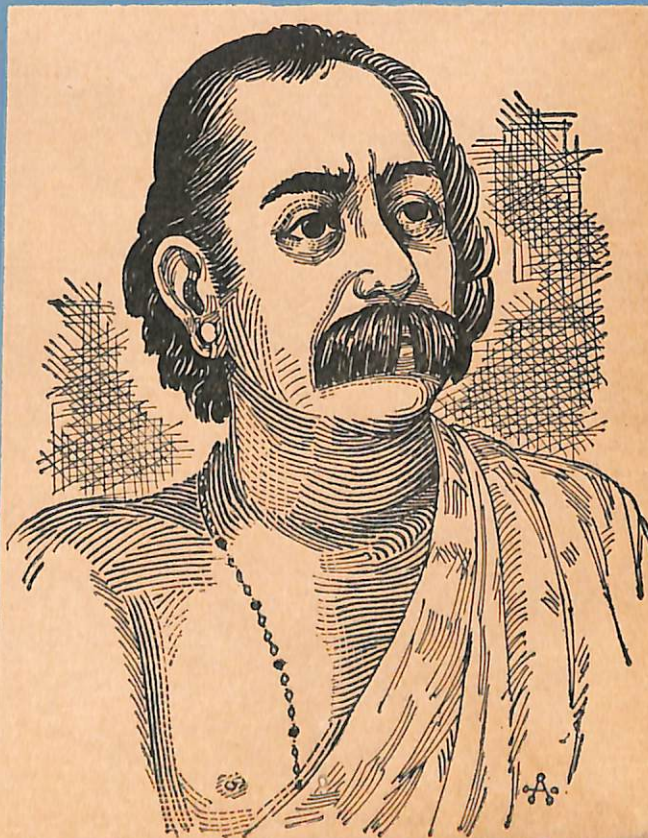
KAMBAN

S. MAHARAJAN

A. No 21943

36/2 ✓

*Makers of
Indian
Literature*



Kamban, perhaps, the greatest Tamil poet, belonged to the Ninth Century A.D. His sublime poetry had kept its hold on the centuries as he had given poetic articulation to those timeless problems which arise at all times and the answers to which will continue to fascinate the spirit of Man till the end of Time. He has thus been rightly acclaimed as *Kavi Chakravarti* or the Emperor of poesy.

A noted poet of America, Edward Leuders says, 'It is clear to me even from a cursory reading of these excerpts that the translator is working with a Poet and an epic poem of high calibre indeed. The characteristic reach of the poet Kamban for cosmic personification in his poetry clearly ties these high and abstract matters to very human detail.'

The author, Justice S. Maharajan, a Judge of the High Court of Judicature at Madras, is a great lover of Kamban and his poetry as this monograph will bear witness.

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The sculpture reproduced on the end-paper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodhana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India. From Nagarjuna-konda, 2nd century A.D. *Courtesy : National Museum, New Delhi.*





இ. சுந்தரமூர்த்தி

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MAKERS OF INDIAN LITERATURE

KAMBAN

21943



BY
S. MAHARAJAN

முனைவர் இ. சுந்தரமூர்த்தி
மேனாள் துணைவேந்தர்
16. பாரதி தெரு,
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FOREWORD

It is clear to me even from a cursory reading of these excerpts that the translator is working with both a Poet and an epic poem of high calibre indeed. The characteristic reach of the Poet Kamban for cosmic personification in his poetry clearly ties these high and abstract matters to very human detail. It is the world of human experience he deals with, and it is through the exaltation of poetic song that he achieves what all the world's great poetry attempts to achieve—a marriage of the divine and timeless with the earthly and experiential.

I am impressed by the skill of the translation, which, although it recognizes and laments the impossibility of fully adequate translation from the Tamil to the harsh and alien English, still reflects with taste and remarkable verve what is obviously the peculiar quality of the original. His execution into English is effective and welcome. Kamban is clearly a poet the English-speaking world will be enriched by knowing through Mr. Maharajan's careful and loving translation.

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EDWARD LEUDERS

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INTRODUCTION

JUDGING from the fantastic popularity that Kamban enjoys in Twentieth Century Tamil Nadu, a foreigner may be tempted to guess that Kamban is a contemporary poet who has sung of the absorbing problems of today. Such a guess would be eleven centuries off the mark, for Kamban lived and died in the Ninth Century A.D. His great poetry keeps its hold firmly on the centuries, because he gives poetic articulation to those timeless problems, which arise at all times and the answers to which will continue to fascinate the spirit of Man till the end of Time.

Kamban had behind him an unbroken poetic tradition of over a thousand years. He did not have the advantage, which the Tamil Poets of early Spring had. Before his arrival, the Tamil language had been handled by scores of masters ; while it was still malleable and responsive, the Sangam Poets of the pre-Christian era had conferred upon the language a delicate reticence and austerity. Tiruvalluvar, of the 2nd Century A.D., had given it a lucidity, precision and terseness, which forced Dr. Graul to describe his couplets as 'apples of gold in a network of silver'. The Vaishnavite Saints (Alvars) and the Saivite Saints (Nayanmars) had, between the 6th Century and the 9th, given the language an extraordinary suppleness and a warm and moving song quality. It appeared as if all the potentialities of the language had been thoroughly exploited before Kamban's arrival. But, in spite of these handicaps, Kamban's genius gave to the language fresh powers of articulation and made it serve the pure perfection of poetry.

He chose the *Ramayana*, because the simple story of Rama, unlike the *Mahabharata*, was free from the complexities which would distract the reader from the liberating influence of poetry. The Tamils had known for many centuries the broad outlines of the story and enjoyed the different situations in the story through the devotional songs of the Alvars. Kamban knew that the advantage of such a familiar setting was that he could divert the entire attention of the reader from the story and focus it upon the marvels of his own creative, narrative, dramatic and lyrical genius. In fact, in the prologue to his *Ramayana*, he proudly declares that he has

chosen the *Ramayana* for his theme in order that the greatness and divinity of poetry may be demonstrated. This claim he makes good with astonishing success.

In fact, with the birth of *Kamba Ramayana* the whole future of Tamil poetry was altered, and this masterpiece has been exercising the most profound impact upon the poetic sensibility of the Tamils during the last eleven centuries. A long series of learned men have been thrilling the masses, from the time of Kamban down to our own, with recitations from, and exposition of the *Kamba Ramayana*. Land grants have been made by the Tamil Kings for the maintenance of these rhapsodists and reciters. Stone inscriptions in the neighbouring territories of Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra show that *Kamba Ramayana* was being expounded to, and enjoyed even by people whose mother tongue was not Tamil. Thus Kamban became one of the most potent instruments of popular education and culture ; he shaped the outlook, character and the aesthetic and religious attitudes of the people in the South ; his *Ramayana* became part of the abiding national memory. He was acclaimed by all poets and scholars as KAVI CHAKRAVARTI or the Emperor of Poesy and he has passed into history as the most learned of Poets. Popular exponents of *Kamba Ramayana* hold discourses continuously for months and it is a marvel that even today mammoth crowds of twenty to forty thousand men, women and children attend these discourses and listen with rapt attention and delight to the songs of Kamban. There must be something timeless about a poet who has gripped the attention of the people for over a millennium. Kamban can never become out of date, because he speaks to us and to the whole world with the Voice of Tomorrow.

THE AGE OF KAMBAN

THE Age of Kamban has been the subject of considerable controversy among the scholars. According to one view, which appears to be the more plausible, he lived in the 9th Century A.D., and according to the other, he lived in the 13th Century.

But there is consensus among the scholars that Kamban was a native of Thiruvazhundur in Tanjore District, and that a landlord by name Sadayappa Vallal was his great admirer and patron and that we owe not a little to this patron for having drawn the best out of Kamban.

Popular imagination has woven several legends around the name of Kamban, and these legends, which are totally valueless as historical material, indicate the attempt of the people to analyse and evaluate the genius of their greatest poet.

According to one legend, Kamban was the contemporary of Ottakootar, a minor poet in the court of a Chola King. By his mastery of prosody and of the mechanics of versification, Ottakootar exercised a tyrannical sway over the literary men of his time; he was suffered by the King even to decapitate the poetasters of the age, who, out of ignorance, committed the slightest mistakes of grammar, syntax or prosody. But, with the advent of Kamban, whose intense poetic genius broke the accepted moulds of grammar and who invented patterns of verbal harmonics which far transcended the conventional scales of Ottakootar, the latter's influence with the King began to dwindle and Kamban became the Poet Laureate in the Court of the Chola King.

One day the King requested both the bards to prepare a poetic rendering of the epic story of Rama. Ottakootar set about the task in great earnest and started producing a laborious work of third rate verse. Kamban was in no hurry to commence the work, but spent his time in playful amusements. Some time later, the King summoned both the poets and questioned them about their progress. Kamban said that he had come up to the Sixth Canto and was working upon the bridge that Rama's monkey hordes were building between India and Lanka as a preliminary to the final battle between Rama and Ravana. Ottakootar, who was listening to this yarn, knew that Kamban had not even commenced

the first Canto. So he challenged Kamban to recite one song from the scene relating to the construction of the bridge. At once, Kamban, with unlaboured spontaneity, sang the original of the following song impromptu :

Kumuda, the monkey-chief
dropped a stately hill into the rocky sea ;
and the hill, with the rhythmic footwork of a dancer,
glided over the rocks and twisted and churned,
shooting forth a spray of ocean-droplets into Heaven ;
and the denizens of Heaven jumped with joy,
hoping that Nectar would rise again from the sea.

Ottakootar, who was irritated by this brilliant extempore performance of Kamban, blamed him for using the word 'thumi' in the song. Kamban said it meant 'droplet'. Ottakootar objected that 'thuli' was the proper word and not 'thumi', but Kamban asserted that the word had the sanction of popular usage. Ottakootar challenged Kamban to prove the usage. At once Kamban took his rival and the King into the town. The three saw a shepherd maid churning curd in front of her house and telling the children playing around her, 'Go away, you kids, lest the curd "thumi" (droplet) should spill upon you.' After making this statement, the churning woman vanished miraculously. Ottakootar realised that Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning herself, had come in the shape of the shepherd maid to justify the verbal inventions of Kamban.

Heart-broken, Ottakootar went home and started tearing to pieces the seven cantos of the *Ramayana*, which he had carefully and laboriously compiled with the aid of a thesaurus. By chance, Kamban went to his rival's house at that juncture and found that only the last canto, Uttara Kanda, remained untorn. With characteristic graciousness, he grabbed his rival by the hand, prevented him from tearing the Uttara Kanda and got his permission to include it as the final Kanda in the *Ramayana* he was yet to produce.

It is desirable that we review the message of Kamban for the benefit of a society which is in danger of losing the dimension of depth. To Kamban, the question of the meaning of Life is one of infinite seriousness, and in his Epic he silences the transitory concerns of life so effectively that he enables us to listen conti-

nually to the voice of the Ultimate Concern. His intuitive and powerful presentation of Truth, Beauty and Goodness gives sustenance to the spirit of our own being, dissolves the rigidities of the Ego and induces in us a new perspective of Ananda. It is hoped that something of this Ananda may come through in the English renderings of Kamban.

BALA KANDA

The Maiden Battle of Rama

WE shall make a rapid survey of the maiden battle of Rama as described by Kamban. Visvamisra, the great sage, takes young Rama and Lakshmana from the custody of King Dasaratha, much against the latter's will, to the dreary desert. Kamban brings out the dreariness of the desert after taking the three characters through the luscious greenery of the forests and the cool rivers undulating down the hills, pausing awhile on plain ground and leaping down steep rocks. The alternate pauses and leaps of the rivers remind them of the rhythmic tinkle of the dancer's anklet. Now they come upon the unfriendly desert, dried, parched and moistureless. The poet, with a chuckle up his sleeve, compares the aridity of the desert with the minds of two incompatible quantities, namely, seekers after Ultimate Reality and harlots,—with Reality-seekers, because in their ruthless search for the Ultimate they have gone beyond the warmth of passion and become detached ; with the harlots, because they ply their passions for hire and thereby become devoid of the least vestige of passion. We note that the poet by his wit effects a skilful though startling linking of two contradictory elements.

It is in the setting of such a dreary desert that Visvamisra starts recounting to Rama the weird atrocities of Thadakai, the giantess.

Before Visvamisra could say that she resided in yonder mountain, came a huge black woman with crimson hair. She looked like a soot-black hill aflame with fire ; the ends of her eyebrows trembled with anger. With pursed lips, she closed her cavernous mouth. She wore around her neck a string of elephants, the trunks of each animal pair remaining intertwined. She let out a roar, at which the Heavens, the outer space and the seven worlds trembled, at which thunder itself became hushed with fear.

The Poet suggests the dynamics of the giantess in the following song :

She grabbed at the passing clouds
And, squeezing them with her hands,
She gobbled them up ;

the huge hills she powdered
with her kick ;
Her giant lips she bit hard
with her giant teeth,
each of which looked like half a moon ;
She seized her trident
and roared,
' You will get this in your chest.'

Viswamitra thought it was time for Rama to act.

' Oh bejewelled One ! ' implored the Rishi, ' She has exhausted the entire gamut of conceivable evil ; she has left us alive, because she thinks we are shrivelled-up things unworthy of being eaten. This is her only restraint. Would you look upon this monster as a woman and as a delicate damsel with her plaited hair-do dangling on her back ? '

The fire-like demon guessed what the Rishi was whispering to Rama and she flung at him her purple trident-fire along with the leaping fire of her whitish eyes.

None saw Rama
touching the arrow
or bending his lovely bow ;
but they saw
The falling pieces of the pulverised trident,
which the monster had plucked from the very tree of Death
and flung headlong.

Thereupon the woman, whose complexion was made as if out of darkness, sent with the speed of sound a rain of stones sufficient to level up the seas. With a rain of arrows the hero thwarted it. Then Rama sent out an arrow, which was as sharp and hot as an unkind word and which penetrated her chest and shot past the heart, like good counsel given by the virtuous to the wicked. The blood that swelled out of her holed heart spread throughout the desert. It seemed as if the rose of the evening sunset had detached itself from the sky and fallen upon the earth.

In this maiden battle of Rama, the Lord of Death, who was pining to drink the blood of the Rakshasa race, smacked his lips with a foretaste of their blood.

The Story of Mahabali

After the destruction of Thadakai, Visvamisra takes his proteges across the desert to a lovely and fertile country. Rama asks him to whom the country belongs. This gives Kamban the chance to tell a dramatic short story through Visvamisra.

Once upon a time this country was ruled by a mighty king called Mahabali. By dint of his might he brought Heaven and Earth under his sway. He decided to augment his powers by performing a Yaga which even the gods could not perform. He, therefore, entrusted his kingdom to holy men and launched upon the great sacrifice. The gods, who learnt of this project, went to Lord Vishnu and requested him to frustrate the Yaga lest Mahabali should acquire much greater powers. Vishnu readily granted this prayer.

He, who had created the Cosmos, took birth as a stunted dwarf. As the far-spreading banyan tree lies hidden in a tiny seed, so did Infinity, in this pigmy shape.

The Dwarf mastered all knowledge and wisdom. Meditation illuminated his form. Wearing a sacred thread, uttering magic incantations with his tongue and holding burning embers on his palm, the Dwarf went forth to the Court of Mahabali, who received him with honours and said that he felt blessed by his visit.

The King asked, 'What can I do for you?' 'Give me three feet of land, if you have it,' said the Dwarf. 'Granted,' declared the King, but Sukra, his preceptor and minister, obstructed the King and said, 'His appearance is deceptive, my King! Don't take him for a mere dwarf. Beware, he is the One who swallowed long ago the whole Universe and the Beyond.'

'Imagine the good I get by making a gift into the supplicating hands of the Lord himself,' declared the King, whose ideal was to give freely and ungrudgingly to those who sought his aid.

In a poem of unsurpassed intensity and felicitous form, which defies the translator's art, Kamban puts the following into Mahabali's mouth:

The Dead are not
the dead ;
But
The dead are those,
Who,
Without dying,

Live,
With palms outstretched
For alms,
And who are the living,
My friend,
If not the givers,
Who, though dead,
Live for Ever ?

With these words Mahabali rejected the advice of his minister and called upon the Dwarf to measure out three feet of land and take it. In the absence of Registration Offices transfer of property was made in those days by the donor pouring water on the hand of the donee.

The Infinite God stuck out his dwarfish hand on which the King poured water. The moment the water touched his hand, the Dwarf began to grow taller and taller. The watching crowd watched admiringly as the Dwarf rose to normal human height, but they became fearful as he grew and grew and touched the Heavens and grew beyond them.

The planted foot grew wider and wider
till it covered all the Earth
and made the Earth look tiny ;
the raised foot
out-compassed the Heavens,
after bringing them within its sweep,
and returned,
there being no room to put it in.

Visvamitra drove home the point of the story by adding that the returning foot of the Lord came down upon Mahabali's head, wiped out his Ego, and absorbed him in its Ultimate Substance.

Kamban's aesthetic sensibility would not be gratified till the story is rounded off with a delicate *finale*. So he adds that Lord Vishnu, after absorbing Mahabali and gifting his kingdom to the Gods, went back to his abode in the Milky Way to rest Himself.

As the Blue One
laid himself to rest
in the Milky sea,
Lakshmi, his consort,

softly touched his feet ;
 and the rugged feet that had
 encompassed all the worlds
 blushed and turned pink
 at her tender touch.

It is by such *delicatesse* that Kamban succeeds in bringing out, with passionate intensity, the paradox of Infinite Power and Infinite Tenderness.

Rama Falls in Love

Listening to such stories, Rama and Lakshmana follow Visvamitra to Mithila, where the wedding of Rama with Sita is to take place.

In the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, the couple had not set eyes on each other before they met at the wedding. In fact, Valmiki's Sita, while recounting to Anasuya the story of her wedding, says that she was just six years of age at her wedding. There was, therefore, little scope for romance at that age.

On the contrary, Kamban throws in a love-scene of extraordinary lyrical beauty, after making the couple mature enough to fall in love with each other before the wedding and even before the breaking of the bow.

Upon his description of the exalted charms of Sita, Kamban lavishes his entire aesthetics of Beauty. According to Kamban, even before the birth of Sita, the Goddess of Beauty appeared to have arrived at perfection ; she had become a Being rather than a Becoming. Down the ages she had evolved by abstracting and assimilating the myriad aspects of Beauty from the myriad beauties in Creation. After assimilating the finest in Beauty, the Goddess found nothing new to absorb, and, therefore, ceased to evolve. But lo ! when Sita was born, the loveliness of Beauty gained a new grace and shone with an ampler radiance than before.

As Rama went round the streets of Mithila along with Visvamitra and Lakshmana, he caught a glimpse of this beauty of Sita from her reflection in a moat beside the King's palace. As he raised his eyes from the reflection, he saw Sita herself standing at the palace balcony. The subtle psychic fusion of two beings in love is arrestingly described by Kamban :

Eye caught Eye, in pairs,
 and each the other devoured ;

their feelings brought to a standstill,
 the Prince stood looking at the Princess
 and the Princess stood looking at the Prince.

Visvamitra and Lakshmana, who had been lagging behind Rama, came up to him. Rama woke up from his absorption and reluctantly followed them to the palace of King Janaka. The mind and the poise and all the charms of Sita lingered around and followed the figure of Rama.

With the disappearance of Rama's figure, to which her soulful glance was riveted, Sita's mind drifts wildly and aimlessly.

The moonrise made her hotter with desire for Rama. She wilted and withered with the lotus flower spread on her bed. Cool sandal paste smeared on her body singed her like liquid fire. Kamban, who creates all this sweet agony, projects himself into the mind of Sita and makes the empathetic interjection : ' Could there be a drug-cure for the malady of Love! '

Meanwhile, the trio had reached the palace of Janaka, where Rama is allotted a bedroom in the balcony. Visvamitra and Lakshmana leave Rama to himself and share a room downstairs. Rama is a stranger to the feeling of Love. As he is musing over Sita, darkness closes in, adding poignancy to his musings. His condition is aggravated by the rising moon. Is he alone? No, says Kamban. Solitude, Darkness, the Moon, his own tormenting self and his Sita keep him company. Rama laments :

The region of her waist,
 looking verily like a chariot ;
 those two long spearing eyes ;
 that couple of shooting breasts ;
 and oh! that inward-drawing smile—
 Does that pitiless God of Killing
 need all this panoply ?

In the company of these tormenting thoughts Rama spends most of the interminable-seeming night and then falls asleep. Kamban, who, unlike Valmiki, depicts Rama as God, is moved by the human agony that afflicts Rama. The love-torn Rama inspires Kamban to point out to us the condescending grace of God, who, out of compassion for Man, comes down upon earth, imprisons himself in Time and Space and subjects himself to agony in order

to redeem Man. The Poet sings of the waking up of Rama at dawn in words of untranslatable charm :

The sweating Sun
 riding in his chariot,
 borne on wheels of light,
 Dipped and bathed himself in the western sea,
 and rose, refreshed and cool,
 in the Eastern sky,
 And, with his tender arms of light,
 touched the feet of Rama
 and stirred him out of sleep.
 And Rama reached the shore
 of that endless agonising night—
 The Joyous One, who might have slept
 in the Sea of Infinity
 On his native couch of a thousand dazzling lights,
 chose, instead,
 to turn and writhe in pain
 on this constricting couch of Space and Time.

As one reads this magnificent poem in the original, one feels the rush of sound of a myriad oceans. The poem has been suffused with such inspired music that the resulting rhythm haunts, and the haunted reader finds himself slipping out of the prison of cause and effect.

The Breaking of a Thousand Bows

Janaka, the King of Mithila, had vowed to give his daughter, Sita, in marriage only to a man who could bend and string the mighty bow of Siva, which was in his keeping. Many a valiant King had tried and failed to string the bow.

The sage Visvamitra introduces Rama to Janaka and tells him of his great prowess in archery and suggests that his protégé might be allowed to have a try at the bow.

Janaka looked at Rama and then at the formidable bow. He became depressed and apprehensive. He cursed himself for the rashness of his vow and was filled with concern for Sita's future.

But Visvamitra gave Rama a meaningful look.

Up rose Rama,
 like a tongue of flame
 leaping from a sacrificial fire

to meet the falling ghee ;
' Broken is the bow,' shouted the gods in joy
and benediction was uttered by the saints.

The Bow lay like Mount Meru
and he lifted it with effortless ease ;
he lifted it as he would lift
a garland of gay flowers made
to put around Sita's neck.
Unwinking, watched the crowd,
they saw not
Rama planting the Bow firm against his foot
nor how adroitly he drew the bow ;
his taking the Bow—they saw,
the breaking of the Bow—they heard.

Doubts Dispelled

Sita, who was in the palace, was unaware of the breaking of the bow by Rama. The figure of the unknown lad, who had smitten her with love, remained sharply engraved in her mind.

While love-lorn Sita is yearning for Rama, Neelamalai, her maid-in-waiting rushes headlong into her presence, with her diamond ear-drops glittering and making rainbow patterns in the Sun, with her loosened saree and dishevelled hair 'chasing her from behind'. She is beside herself with joy and she shouts and sings and dances, without remembering even to salute Sita or passing on the good news.

Sita asks Neelamalai, 'What joy fills your heart? Tell me the news.' At once, the excited maid collects her faculties, salutes Sita and then tells her how a Prince by name Rama lifted the bow of Siva as if it were a tiny toy and broke it. She adds that he is the lotus-eyed son of Dasaratha, the King of Ayodhya, and that he has been accompanied by his brother and Rishi Visvamitra. The reference to Rama's two companions dispels Sita's doubts ; she feels assured that the breaker of the bow is no other than the one who had stolen into her heart. This assurance produces a significant physical effect on Sita ; that part of her body, which is girt by a golden waist-band, heaves and swells, breaking the waist-band in twain. Kamban's seismographic needle registers with quivering sensitivity every secret tremor.

Wedding Invitation

Leaving Sita in this mood of sweet expectancy, Kamban takes us to Janaka, whose joy is greater than the explosive sound that accompanied the breaking of the bow. He asks Visvamitra if the wedding might be celebrated forthwith or after the arrival of King Dasaratha. At the bidding of the Saint, Janaka sends an invitation to Dasaratha.

Towards Mithila

As Dasaratha and his people reached the outskirts of Mithila, Janaka with his retinue received them and took them into the city. Then a procession round the city was arranged for Rama, who decked himself with flowers and jewels and mounted a chariot which took him round Mithila.

The procession ends in front of the Wedding Hall in which the two sages, Vasishta and Visvamitra are waiting. Rama enters the Hall and salutes both the Rishis by falling at their feet. He wears a garland of diamonds around his neck, which swings, as he prostrates himself, and throws off flashes of light upon his blue skin. The contrast of colours fascinates the Poet, who says Rama is like a seasonal cloud gently settling down at the feet of the Rishis—a cloud which is coruscating with lightning.

By exploiting colour words and vivid imagery and the littlest of significant details, Kamban produces, not a still photograph, not a motion picture, nor even a technicolour film, but a three-dimensional drama staged right in front of us.

The Lovers Meet

After all the guests have taken their seats, Vasishta suggests to Janaka that the bride might be fetched.

As Sita walks in softly, her jewels cast polychromatic images moving on the ground; it seems as though Mother Earth, fearing that the ruggedness of the Earth might hurt Sita's tender feet, has rolled out a carpet of multicoloured petals on the floor.

In a few bold dramatic strokes Kamban brings out the personality of the principal guests by merely stating their reactions to the appearance of Sita.

As the bride, who had the character of a sweet melody, drew nearer, all hands went up in salutation to her, except those of Rama and the Rishis. For, argues the Poet, all things that had

a mind, regarded Sita as divine and what the mind thought the body promptly carried out.

Though Neelamalai's description of Rama was sufficiently reassuring, there was still some lingering doubt in Sita's mind about his identity. It would be immodest for her to stare at him. Pretending to adjust her bangles, she casts a quick furtive glance at him through the corner of her eye ; she is now convinced that the Rama she sees objectively tallies in every particular with the one she has been subjectively nourishing in her heart.

During the split second that she looks at him the blue charms of Rama flow like a river into the large eyes of Sita.

At this juncture, Visvamisra announces, at the instance of Dasaratha, that the wedding would take place the very next day.

Synthesis of Bhoga and Yoga

The next morning Vasishtha is ready with all the materials needed for the wedding sacrament.

The bridegroom and the bride, both bedecked with flowers, take their seats on the bridal dais. As Rama and Sita sit, side by side, touching each other, Kamban whispers to us that they look like the grand synthesis of Bhoga and Yoga. The Poet believes that there is no inherent incompatibility between earthly joy and celestial bliss and that the two can be welded into a harmonious whole.

With the wedding Visvamisra's task is done. His exit from the epic is celebrated by Kamban in a song, which sings with orchestral fulness and exudes Visvamisra's sense of fulfilment and exaltation.

As the lordly groom
and Janaka's darling cuckoo
are dallying in the versatile fields of bliss,
Visvamisra, in the Vedic mode,
blesses them
and sets forth on his journey northward,
towards his retreat
in the dizzy heights
of Meru, the Mount of gold.

With this close-up of Visvamisra, the Poet bids farewell to one, who has brought about a union of momentous significance for the Epic.

AYODHYA KANDA

Now the curtain rises on Ayodhya Kanda, in which Rama is deprived of the crown by the machinations of Mantharai, the hunchback, and of Kaikeyi, the youngest wife of Dasaratha. By the banishment of Rama to the forest the ground is prepared for the abduction of Sita by Ravana and the final extermination of Evil and Tyranny.

Kamban begins the Ayodhya Kanda with a lovely song of invocation, which is as perfect of its kind as anything in the language.

Matter,
which is descended from Ether,
pervades
the whole of the limit-disdaining
expanse of Space ;
And God dwells in this expanse,
infusing and transcending it,
even as Soul and Consciousness
infuse the Flesh, yet transcend it.
That Godhead is no other
than that Prince of Princes,
that wearer of the warrior's anklets,
who, teased and ill-treated
by his queenly step-mother and
a hunchbacked hag,
abdicated the sceptre,
crossed jungle and sea
and saved the celestials
from tyranny.

The original of this poem, which has been tortured out of shape and rhythm by the sadistic mechanism of translation, would give us a measure of Kamban's capacity to fuse scientific thought with religious emotion and beatific vision.

The Cabinet Meets

After his return from Mithila, Dasaratha spends many happy days at Ayodhya. With the weddings of his able and virtuous

sons, his secular life has become rich and full. One day he leaves his palace for his Council Chamber on an elephant's back, and directs his ministers to be fetched to the Council Hall. Vasishtha, his Prime Minister, arrives first. The other ministers enter the Council Chamber in the order of precedence, bow to Vasishtha first and then salute Dasaratha with folded hands. After Vasishtha and Dasaratha greet them, they take their appointed seats. Looking at them with benevolence, Dasaratha says that he wishes to emulate his spotless predecessors, who, after reaching old age, handed over the kingdom to their sons and went away to the forest in search of spiritual enlightenment.

Dasaratha requests the Council of Ministers to ponder over his proposal and offer advice.

Vasishtha, who was intently listening to the king's words, considers his proposal in the light of the wisdom and understanding behind it, of the unanimous opinion of the ministers and the interests of the citizens. Then he speaks :

It is indeed a virtuous duty.

Your utterance is worthy of your nobility.

Dasaratha is overjoyed that his proposal has met with Vasishtha's approval.

The faces of the elder statesmen looked like outstretched letters on which approval was writ large. At Dasaratha's request Sumantra fetches Rama.

Rama bows before Vasishtha and then salutes the feet of Dasaratha, who is overwhelmed by love and embraces Rama, with tears gushing from his eyes.

Dasaratha explains the tradition of his royal ancestors, who, in the evening of their lives, handed over their crowns to their sons and then set forth to save their own souls.

As the father made this request, the lotus-eyed son neither coveted the crown nor disdained it. He realized it was his duty to rule. Thinking to himself, 'whatever is commanded by the King is law unto me,' Rama accepted the royal command.

At once Dasaratha embraced Rama again and left for his palace, surrounded by his ministers.

Invitations for the coronation were sent to the sovereigns of different countries of the earth ; they were sealed with gold-plated seals bearing the inscription of Garuda.

The Festive City

Rama is getting ready for the crowning ceremony. The citizens of Ayodhya beautified the beautiful city as if they would polish the Sun or dust the resplendent jewel on the broad chest of Vishnu, the Protector of the worlds.

Chariots and elephants studded the streets. As the gold-caparisoned elephants walked, they looked like the hill of the Rising Sun, walking with the glittering Sun on their foreheads.

As the City was thus scintillating with joy, Mantharai, the malignant hunchback came on the scene like the embodiment of all the evils perpetrated by Ravana. The festivities roused her envy. Her mind quivered, her anger struck roots deep into her, her heart ached, her eyes sparkled with fire, her words boiled up with rage.

This woman, who could plunge the three worlds into grief, burst into the palace of Kaikeyi, the third wife of Dasaratha and the mother of Bharatha. She pursed her lips and recalled to her mind and fixed in her memory the scene of child-Rama playfully shooting clay pellets from his bow at her hump. She could not bear to see the urchin, that had mocked at her deformity, ascending the throne. She entered the bed-chamber of Kaikeyi in a bid to persuade her to thwart the impending coronation of Rama, her step-son.

Kamban's Refinement

Kamban casts Kaikeyi, as in fact he casts every other character in the epic, in a mould radically different from that of Valmiki. She is lovable, gracious, magnanimous and generous and is so wholesomely constituted that even sub-consciously she makes no distinction between her son, Bharatha, and her step-son, Rama. By introducing this refinement, Kamban arms Kaikeyi more strongly against the wily onslaughts of Mantharai and creates more challenging problems for himself. But, he meets the challenge convincingly by solving the problem at a deeper and subtler level of psychology. The scene in which Mantharai succeeds in poisoning the innocent and incorruptible mind of Kaikeyi, is an epic by itself and the bold dramatic treatment given by Kamban to the insidious manner in which Kaikeyi is enlisted on the side of Evil cannot be discussed within the limitations of available space. Suffice it for the present to say that, like the cunning technician that Mantharai is, she con-

verts Kaikeyi by an argument, based not on the cupidity of the human heart, but upon its exalted nobility. She asks her, 'When the indigent and the poor, pursued by distress and poverty, go to you and beg for alms, will you, in your turn, beg of Kausalya to give you gold to help those in distress, or say "No" to those who beg for succour? If her son Rama becomes King, the whole world will become that of Kausalya, and are you going to live on gifts doled out by her?'

As wicked Mantharai uttered these words, says the Poet, the sacred heart of the noble Queen turned profane, by force of the boons obtained by the gods for the destruction of Evil. She wanted Mantharai to tell her how to secure the crown for Bharatha. The woman, whose mind was as crooked as her body, reminded her of the two boons Dasaratha had given her at the time of his conquest of Samparan, a Rakshasa, and she went on to suggest, 'With one boon you get the Kingdom for your son, and with the other, you banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years.' Kaikeyi proceeded to execute this plan without loss of time.

Dasaratha was shocked when Kaikeyi asked him for these boons. He entreated her not to insist upon her request to banish Rama, but Kaikeyi would not relent.

As the sorrowing Emperor rolled in the dust, the unmoved woman said, 'I shall accept the boons if you grant them; else, Oh King! I shall kill myself.' It was clear to Dasaratha that Kaikeyi was bent on getting what she wanted. In exasperation, he grants her the boons.

'Fallen is this wretch,' cried he,
 'Granted, granted is your request.
 Let my son rule over the forest,
 and, dying, let me rule over Heaven.
 Never, never shall you and your son
 swim ashore from the Sea of Infamy.'

Kaikeyi Sleeps

As he said these words, a great sorrow, which was as sharp and fatal as a well-tempered and sharpened dagger, stabbed his heart and he became unconscious. As for the woman with the unmoved heart, a sense of fulfilment stole into her and she fell fast asleep. It is a subtle truth of psychology that an overwrought mind, which is suddenly released from great tension, slides quickly

into a state of deep sleep. The Poet gives dramatic expression to this truth by sending Kaikeyi into the peace of slumber after sending Dasaratha into an agonized stupor.

Nature Protests

Though Kaikeyi finds repose in sleep, all Nature, according to Kamban, rebels against her great act of treachery.

The Night breaks into Dawn. The cool Night-Maid, says the Poet, hurried away as if ashamed to show her face before [men and as if abashed at the conduct of the woman, who since her wedding day had acted as the soul of Dasaratha, but who, when her lord was struck with sorrow, showed him no pity whatever.

With day-break the stars disappear into the sky. The star-studded firmament looked like a far-spreading canopy hung with lustrous pearly hangings, which bathed the entire Earth with their white radiance. Now that the Coronation of Rama (whose crimson eye looked like a laughing lotus) has been put off, where is the need for the canopy? As the stars hide themselves in the sky, it looks as though the canopy is being hurriedly dismantled before Rama would wear the coronation armlet around his arm.

The Sun rises. The hostile darkness that was like dense overhanging smoke was put to flight. The life of Dasaratha (the descendant of the Sun) was wearing out like the fading lamps in the palace. As if infuriated by the sinful wickedness of treacherous Kaikeyi, the blazing Sun rose above the Eastern hill, reddening with anger.

The Coronation Crowd

The people of Ayodhya, who know nothing of the bed-chamber scene, were ecstatically looking forward to the coronation of Rama. Each enjoyed the prospect of the coronation according to his or her temperament and maturity. Women, mature in age, regarded Rama's elevation with the mother-heart of Kausalya. The saints looked upon the event with the detached enlightenment of Vasishta. The younger women resembled Sita in their attunement to the joyous occasion. Sita in her joy looked like Lakshmi herself. The older men, who had become other-worldly, resembled Dasaratha in their serenity.

Princes and Kings from all over the globe flooded Ayodhya to witness the coronation of the spouse of Sita.

Fresh-Blown Lotus

As the coronation crowds were surging in the streets of Ayodhya, Vasishta, who was busying himself inside the palace with the performance of sacred rites, asked Sumantra to bring the King forthwith. Sumantra went to Dasaratha's mansion and failing to find him there, went to the palace of Kaikeyi. He was commanded by Kaikeyi to bring Rama to her. Rama appeared before Kaikeyi and prostrated himself at her feet. Kaikeyi told him: 'The King has ordered that your brother Bharatha shall rule his Kingdom and you shall go out into the jungle, live with matted locks in the company of saints, perform penance, bathe in the holy rivers and return in fourteen years.'

Rama rejoiced at this heartless command. The Poet says that Rama's face, which, before hearing the command, resembled the lotus in freshness and charm, outshone the fresh-blown lotus after hearing the command. Rama said :

Were it not the King's Command but yours,
would I disobey it ?

This very moment I take leave of you
and set out for the forest.

Rama knew that his father was in the inner Chamber, but he did not go in to take leave of him. He offered his salutation in the direction of his father, and after prostrating at the feet of Kaikeyi again, he left for the palace of his mother, Kausalya. *En passant* we may note that in Valmiki's *Ramayana*, Rama, before leaving for the forest, seeks an interview with Dasaratha, who calls Rama in and tells him, 'I have been defrauded by Kaikeyi to grant those boons. You must, therefore, ignore my Command and become King of Ayodhya.' This advice provokes Valmiki's Rama to preach a homily to Dasaratha and to dissuade him from breaking his pledged word. Kamban cuts out this awkward farewell scene for sound artistic reasons. Firstly, the pathos of separation would be more dramatic and intense if Rama went into the wilderness without taking leave of his grief-stricken father. Secondly, Dasaratha's love for Rama and love for Truth are in such lofty conflict that the tonality of either would be impaired by overstringing the other.

Virtue's Sobs

With none to fan him with *samarai* fans,
 with none to hold aloft the white umbrella of royalty
 over his head,
 with heartless Destiny going in front of him
 and Virtue going behind him
 with sobs and sighs,
 the solitary figure of Rama came
 into the presence of the woman,
 whose mother-heart was throbbing with expectant joy,
 and yearning to see Rama, blue-mountain-like,
 come with a dazzling crown upon his head.

As Rama gently broke the news of his banishment, Kausalya broke down.

Rama takes his sorrowing mother in his arms and tries to console her. She says, 'By all means let Bharatha rule the world. He is rich with the perfection of Virtue and is better than you, even. But, I will, by cringing before the ill-advised King and appealing to him, protect you from banishment.' With these words, she rushes towards Kaikeyi's palace, where she finds the King lying unconscious on the floor.

Meanwhile, Sage Vasishta conveys the dreadful news to the waiting crowd of citizens. In their delirious frenzy, the people attribute the vilest of motives to Dasaratha and declare that his desire to retire after crowning Rama is only a ruse.

They proclaim :

' We will cluster around Rama
 and following him,
 we will dwell in the serpent-infested Jungle—
 and the Jungle shall in a brief while
 turn into the City Beautiful.'

As the citizens were bemoaning their fate, Lakshmana raged with anger upon learning that his pretty-eyed step-mother had charmed Dasaratha into banishing Rama and securing the Crown for her own son.

' Here stand I ', he roared,
 ' to exterminate the folk
 who call for battle

and to rid the Earth of their burden ;
 to pile their carcasses,
 one upon the other,
 till the heap reaches the roof of the sky ;
 to set the crown upon the head
 of the only King I recognize.
 Come who may
 to cross my wishes.'

Rama came to Lakshmana sprinkling a cool spray of mellowed words. He came, says the Poet, like a blue-black cloud to drench an inextinguishable fire.

After quelling Lakshmana's rage, Rama prepares to go to the forest.

Weeping Voices

The poignancy of the scene invaded the homes of Ayodhya. Stunned housewives ceased to perform their domestic chores.

The kitchens lost their smoke ;
 the terraces lost
 the incense of burning sandalwood ;
 cupfuls of milk the parrots lost ;
 the cradles lost
 the rocking hands of women,
 the babies squealing.

This is great drama, literature that makes the kitchen and the terrace, the milk-cup and the cradle, walk and talk.

Ayodhya's streets would be usually filled with song and merriment. But, now ?

The sound of *mridangam*
 ceased ;
 the stringed lutes were hushed ;
 stilled was the noise of the festive crowds ;
 with nothing but weeping voices
 the regal streets were filled.

Rama went to the palace of Sita, followed by hordes of grief-stricken citizens. He tried to dissuade her from following him to the forest by telling her that she could not stand the forest heat. Sita retorted :

Can the huge forest burn hotter
 than your parting ?

As Rama stood lost in thought, Sita went into the inner chamber, audaciously put on a saree made of the bark of trees, came out and stood beside Rama, firmly clasping his long arm.

In the *Ramayana* of Valmiki, Sita does not wear the hermit's weeds voluntarily but is forced by Kaikeyi to wear them. The coarseness of the garment shocks Sita, who trembles at the sight of it 'like a deer trembling at the sight of a net cast to catch it'. Vasishta and Dasaratha curse Kaikeyi for her hard-hearted gift, but Kaikeyi turns a deaf ear to their curses. Kamban, on the contrary, makes Sita wear the coarse garment voluntarily and cheerfully and thereby lends dramatic finality to her resolve to follow Rama into exile.

Departure for the Woods

It was sunset when Rama started for the jungle along with Sita and Lakshmana. Sumantra drove them for twenty miles in a chariot to a fragrant grove, where Rama alighted for the night. As he was conversing with the Rishis in that grove, a dense circle of citizens, ten miles in diameter, converged on the grove and covered its outside as if with a blanket. They settled themselves down on the river-beds, on sand slopes, on green grass, on every available patch of land.

As the crowd started sleeping, Rama wished to go further into the forest without their knowledge and before doing so, he asked Sumantra to go back to Ayodhya and convey his salutations to his 'three mothers' and to wipe out the sorrow of Prince Bharatha by remaining constantly by his side. This amazing compassion of Rama for Bharatha moves the Poet to exclaim :

So said the One,
who, hiding from the Scriptures,
took to dwelling in the woods.

The idea of Kamban is that mere theological learning is a hindrance to the discovery of Reality. Such learning merely thickens the ego of Man and puts Reality at a greater distance from him. The more we burrow into the scriptures, the more perplexed we become about the nature of Reality. God, therefore, decided, for the benefit of Man, to quit the Scriptures and to give more convincing proof of Himself by going into the woods. And how does going into the woods demonstrate to Man the reality of God ?

In the artificial City, the handiwork of Man is more in evidence than that of God. Man becomes drunk with his egotistic powers as he sees in the city the glory of his achievements. But, when Man leaves the City and goes out into the forests and mountains and sees stately trees with myriad-tinted leaves or wild cascades flowing down the hills, he feels humbled, forgets the achievements of his own ego and is overpowered by the unseen Presence of God. As a visit to the wilderness turns the mind of Man from his own Ego to God, Kamban justly says that God hides himself from the Scriptures and chooses to dwell in the woods.

This profound sentiment crosses the mind of the Poet as Rama, the incarnate God has discarded the City of Ayodhya and is about to go deeper into the forest. The request made by Rama to Sumantra to stand by Bharatha and console him is so refreshingly free from the pettiness and envy we associate with human nature that Kamban makes this memorable exclamation so that the reader may notice this existential proof of the divinity of Rama—'So said the One, who, hiding from the Scriptures, took to dwelling in the woods.' The whole sublimity of the passage derives from the weight of passionate insight thrown into it. This is not cleverness or artifice, but genius.

The Mynah and the Parrot

Now, Sumantra turns to Sita, who is looking forward to a joyous future in the forest. She tells Sumantra, 'Convey my regards first to the King and my mothers-in-law. Then tell my loving sisters carefully to nurse my golden *Mynah* and parrot.' Sumantra is moved by this child-like request of the simple, unsophisticated Sita, who has known no sorrow and who has not the slightest notion of the rigours and perils of forest life. As he thinks of her pathetic innocence, Sumantra breaks into tears. Sita wonders if she has given offence to Sumantra. She muses, 'I merely said the birds must be looked after. Why should he weep?' Unable to divine the reason for his tears, she starts weeping, too.

With a heavy heart, Sumantra takes leave of Rama and drives back all alone to Ayodhya.

The Godly Moon

Leaving the sleeping legion of Citizens, Rama takes this opportunity of going farther into the jungle. It is pitch dark now, and who escorts Rama into the dark? The Poet says :

The Chastity of Sita,
the manliness of his own Virtue
and his younger brother and the bow—
these were the protective armoury
that escorted this Earth-descended Grace,
as he launched out into the darkness of the Night.

As the three groped forward, the darkness seemed to have an obstructive solidity about it; it seemed to collude with the Rakshasas, the friends of Evil, and out of friendship for them, to obstruct the march of the trio. It is by such whispered intimations that Kamban suggests the impending confrontation between Good and Evil.

Driving
the ink-drenched darkness out,
came the Godly Moon,
as if the Sky, lighting a lantern,
had lifted it up with its hands.

In some subtle way the Poet involves the reader in this pilgrimage through the darkness and in the ensuing Crusade against Evil. Kamban expresses our sense of sudden relief and gratitude by calling the timely Moon 'Godly'. In the whole epic we get a continual consciousness of eternal law and order and good.

As the Moon breaks through the night, the Poet gives a verbal silhouette of the three figures moving in the moonlight. Rama moves like a black-washed hill. Lakshmana is like a hill having the same contours but plated with gold. The play of moonlight on the ground is so soft that the Moon would appear to have spread out filaments of whitest cotton in order that the tender feet of Sita might tread the forest unhurt. Leaving the three in these gay idyllic surroundings, Kamban takes us along with Sumantra to the poignant scenes in Ayodhya.

Well of Tears

As Sumantra returned to Ayodhya, Dasaratha asked him, 'Is the Prince far or near?' 'Into the remote jungle of rising bam-

boos, the Prince is gone' said Sumantra. The moment Dasaratha heard the words, 'the Prince is gone', gone was the soul of Dasaratha. The tragedy of Dasaratha stirs Kamban to his depths and what a well of tears has he dug out of it!

The sight of the bereaved wives holding fast to the body of Dasaratha leads the Poet into a mood of profound reflection upon the glory that was Dasaratha. At the cost of his life he had kept his pledged word and, by dying for an ideal, he had achieved the life eternal. The body-boat, in which Dasaratha sailed, had ferried him safely across the ocean of earthly life to the shore of Bliss; it had steered clear of the sharks of delusion and returned safe after landing its passenger in Eternity, thereby proving its seaworthiness. As the wives held fast to the dead body, it seemed they had boarded this trustworthy vessel in the confidence it would take them, too, to the same destination.

The Excursion

Blissfully unaware of the tragic events in Ayodhya, Sita and Rama walk through the forest with great gaiety. In a holiday mood, they enjoy the Carnival of Nature. The spirit of tender and charming irresponsibility, which marks their picknicking excursion, is brought out by Kamban in a series of poems of exalting loveliness and charm; Rama strolled along with Sita, like a lovely cloud strolling with a flash of lightning. As they reached the northern bank of the Ganges and were conversing delightfully in the company of Saints, Guha, the hunter-chief, came to pay his respects to Rama. He was the Lord of a thousand boats, armed with a deadly bow. His shoulders were carved in stone, and his thighs, cut in ebony. He was tall, of such height as could plumb the Gangetic depth. A piece of red skin flowed down from his waist and a shiny belt of tiger's tail fastened tight the hide around his loins. He wore a necklace of beads, strung as if with a row of teeth; he wore an anklet, strung as if with pebbles; he had a tuft, strung as if with sheaves of darkness; lion-like, he had bushy eyelashes, strung as if with paddy grains. Buckled to his belt was a blood-stained dagger. He had the awe-inspiring look of a venomous cobra, but he lisped his words like a babbler and his waist was strong as Indra's diamond lance. 'Unversed in Falsehood's ways', 'pure of heart' and 'more loving than a mother'. Guha placed before Rama his tribute of fish and honey.

Kamban's Rama and sages were vegetarians, unlike Valmiki's, and regarded vegetarianism both as a virtue and as a hall-mark of culture. The hunter-chief's request to eat fish shocked the assembled saints and sounded offensive. Rama smilingly told them that the gift brought by Guha was 'bathed in love', and thereby it had become consecrated and must be deemed to have been eaten with sweet relish. Guha asked Rama why he had left Ayodhya, and Lakshmana unfolded to him the woeful tale, which drew tears from Guha's eyes. Rama is moved by the intense devotion of Guha and adopts him as his brother. He tells him :

Hitherto we were brothers four,
and from now on, we are brothers five.
Is there any limit to brotherhood ?
Love increases the number.

It is a happy sentiment of the Poet that brotherhood is founded not in birth but in love, and with expanding love, the bounds of brotherhood expand, there being no limit to either.

After taking leave of Guha, the three reached the Chitrakuta hills in the morning. The whole day they spent under the shade of trees on the river bank. It is evening now.

Catharsis of Love

As the three remain meditating near a mountain pond, darkness falls, and Lakshmana takes Rama and Sita to a hermitage he has improvised for them on the slope of the hill. He has built it with his own princely hands. He uprooted bamboos from the hill side, cut them into pieces of equal length, planted them in a row, put up a roof-frame over them and fastened it to the planted posts. He thatched the roof with closely-knit teak leaves and overlaid it with flowering reeds. He built a wall around and plastered the wall with mud and treated the surface with water. Appurtenant to this hut, he built a private chamber for Sita with the same materials and decorated its walls with red loam and studded it with glittering stones picked up from the jungle stream.

As he surveyed the hut lovingly put up by Lakshmana, Rama rejoiced. He is stirred by the love showered on him by Sita and Lakshmana, and thinks that such spontaneous gifts of love come only to those who have lost all.

'The queenly feet of Janaka's daughter
have trodden the Jungle path ;

the peerless hands of my younger brother
 have built this hermitage ;
 what on earth one could not have
 once one has deprived oneself of all !'
 Rama then turns to Lakshmana and asks :
 ' When did you learn, my brother,
 to do this wise ? '

and as he said so, dewy tears misted his lotus eyes. Rama thinks that his reputation for the vindication of Virtue is undeserved, as it is based, not upon his own sacrifice, but upon that of Lakshmana. Leaving us in this state of catharsis, Kamban takes us to Bharatha, who is at Kekaya on a visit to his maternal grandfather, the King of Kekaya.

Tyrant Woe

Kaikeyi, who slept in peace after getting the two boons from the King, woke up and hurriedly sent messengers to Kekaya to fetch Bharatha. Bharatha, on receipt of the message, rushed back to Ayodhya, without knowing that Rama had been banished and Dasaratha was dead.

He found the City desolate. Foreboding evil, Bharatha dashed into the palace to see the King, but the King was not to be seen anywhere. He went to Kaikeyi and asked her where the King was. She embraced him and said, ' Grieve you not, Your father is gone to Heaven.' The callousness of her reply intrigued Bharatha, and the news of Dasaratha's death made him breathless, and unconscious. Recovering consciousness a little later, he broke into a loud lamentation. Then his thoughts naturally turned to Rama for consolation. He said : ' It is Rama of boundless virtue, who is my father, mother, brother and lord. Unless I prostrate myself at his sacred feet, my mind will not be rid of this tyrant woe.' Bharatha's reverence for Rama angered Kaikeyi, who, in a thundering voice, said :

' Companioned by those two—
 wife and brother—
 he is now a forest-dweller.'

The casual manner in which she uttered these words provoked Bharatha to ask, ' What more plots are there to uncover ? And what more griefs to inflict on my ear ? ' ' Why did the King die ?

and why did Rama go to the forest ?' Kaikeyi replied with verve, ' With one boon I caused Rama to be banished and with the other, I procured the Realm for you. Unable to bear it all, the King gave up the ghost.'

Before hearing these words, Bharatha's folded hands remained upstretched over his head in salutation, but on hearing these words,

his folded hands
came down to stop his ears ;
his eyebrows jumped up and down
and danced a fierce dance ;
gleams of fire mingled with his breath,
and ran in and out ;
blood flushed his eye and flowed forth.

In this stanza, Kamban dramatizes the very physiological symptoms of indignation. The anatomy of anger is seldom more vivaciously described. Annexing Rama's crown out of cupidity would be an unholy act of sacrilege in the eyes of Bharatha, but the omission to kill wicked Kaikeyi on the spot appears to him equally unholy. However, he restrains himself from tearing her mouth lest he should incur Rama's wrath by doing so.

In his despair, Bharatha thinks that all values have collapsed in this sordid scheming world. But, later, recollecting in tranquillity the sacrifice of Rama and Dasaratha, his confidence in Virtue is restored. He exclaims :

If here is a King who would lay down his life
to keep his pledged word,
if here is a hero, to return from the exile
thrust upon him by a heartless word;
and if here is a Bharatha to rule the Kingdom
that has come his way,
the blame lies with the stars, not with Virtue,
which shines undimmed.

Bharatha's conviction that the whole of life is sustained by the higher laws of virtue is expressed by Kamban in words of singular force and grandeur. The Poet's mastery over the choice of words and sonorities is uplifting and his marvellous blending of sound and sense makes him the most untranslatable of Tamil Poets. The lofty disdain with which Bharatha refers in this song to his own

self in the third person gives his holy name the contextual meaning of sinner. Kamban contrives such dramatic situations and puts such eloquence into his living characters that he is able to sustain in the reader a feeling of passionate intimacy with things that count.

Bharatha refuses to remain by the side of Kaikeyi because he says she is a sinner with a mind filled with unspeakable cruelty. He goes to Kausalya and tells her that the solar dynasty has become tainted by 'a slander called Bharatha', because on account of him, sinful Kaikeyi had caused Rama to be expelled. Hearing these words of lofty sorrow, Kausalya feels an instantaneous sense of identity with Bharatha. Weeping, she gathers up and embraces Bharatha, as if the one who had given up the crown and gone to the jungle, has come back and stood right in front of her. Vasishta comes to Bharatha at this juncture and tells him, 'A Realm without a strong King is like a Day without the dazzling Sun, and a planetless Night without the lucid Moon. Your father is dead and your brother has renounced the crown which has descended upon you by virtue of your mother's request. Take over, my son, the Government of this domain.' As he heard these words, Bharatha shuddered in fear. With glowing indignation, he asked if it was proper for men of Virtue to give such advice.

He adds that Rama must be brought back and crowned in accordance with law and immemorial custom. 'If you utter any word more', he said, 'I will kill myself.' Vasishta and others, who heard these words, were struck with Bharatha's sublime sense of justice and eagerness to right the wrong done to Rama. Bharatha called Satrugna, his younger brother, and asked him to proclaim by tom-tom to the people that he was resolved to give them back their lawful Sovereign. The dead City revived on hearing this proclamation. It is the diagnosis of Kamban that sorrow is the result of the deprivation of love and can be cured by an adequate supply of love. The Poet says :

Bharatha went, followed by chariots, cavalcades of horses and elephants, *on foot*, unlike Valmiki's Bharatha, who mounted a chariot and rode fast in his eagerness to meet Rama and bring him back.

As Bharatha, with his Army reached the Ganges, Guha, who was on the opposite side, jumped to the conclusion that the Army was directed against Rama.

Kamban's Guha is the very personification of unconditioned love and devotion. He recalls to our mind the unspoilt awareness and the uninhibited reactions of a child. His loyalty to Rama constrains him to act excitedly and unrestrainedly.

A sword buckled to his belt,
biting his lips, his eyes afire,
uttering words that cut and pierced,
beating his war-drum, sounding his bugle,
stood he,
with his shoulders swelling to rush,
like close kinsmen, to his support.

Guha gathers his warriors around him and tells them :

This deep, long-waved river—
Dare they cross it and survive ?
Are we archers that would flee
at the sight of these huge elephant hordes !
Did not Rama call me ' friend ',
and is that not a word among words ?

The ungraciousness of Bharatha distresses Guha most. In his martial speech to his warriors, he says :

' To my Lord, who gave them kingdom,
They wouldn't give the jungle that we rule !'

As Guha stands on the southern bank of the Ganges, Minister Sumantra approaches Bharatha on the northern bank and gives him a description of Guha and his devotion to Rama. At once, Bharatha, in his eagerness to meet Guha, hastens to the water's edge, taking Satrugna with him. The hunter-chief now has a close view of Bharatha.

Dressed in jungle weeds, his body stained with dust,
his face bereft of laughter, like a pale, beamless Moon,
his grief so mellow as to melt the rockiest of rocks—
Such was the sorrow-stricken figure that Guha saw
and seeing it, Guha stood dazed, choked and sobbing,
the bow in his hand slithering down to the ground.

Recovering from the shock, Guha realizes that Bharatha's intention is far from war-like. He bursts out at once :

This trusty Prince does look like my lord
and the one who stands beside him

does look like my lord's brother.
 He is in hermit's attire, his grief is without end,
 he salutes in the direction of Rama.
 Can any one born brother to my lord
 be guilty ever of misdemeanour ?

Guha rows in a lonely boat to the opposite bank and salutes Bharatha, who prostrates at Guha's feet and tells him he has come to right the wrong committed by Dasaratha and to take back Rama and crown him. As he hears these words, Guha clasps tight the feet of Bharatha and says :

'Oh, celebrated one!
 your nobility is such indeed
 that, in the eyes of those who ponder,
 a thousand Ramas cannot equal you.'

Bharatha tells Guha, 'Pray tell me where our elder brother rested.' Guha takes him to the hermitage, where on a slab of stone overspread with grass, Rama had taken bed. Bharatha falls down at once shivering to the ground and is lost in grief. Then Bharatha asks, 'If this is where the great one slept, where did he spend his time—the one who has boundless love for him and who followed close upon his heels ?' Guha replies :

As the lovely dark Prince and she
 slept here together,
 Lakshmana kept vigil, bow in hand,
 heaving long, hot sighs,
 his eyes pouring tears ;
 Unwinking, he kept vigil
 till Night's limit-line came into view.

Guha's report is as touching as the Gentleman's report to Kent of Cordelia's reactions to Lear's sufferings.

At Bharatha's request, Guha caused the sixty thousand troops of Bharatha and the grief-stricken people of Ayodhya to be ferried across the Ganges. Then Bharatha boarded a boat along with his brother and the three Queens and Minister Sumantra. Guha rowed this boat, 'which crawled on those lovely swimming feet called the oars.'

Introducing the Queens

As they pass over the river, Guha points to Queen Kausalya and asks Bharatha who she is. Bharatha replies : 'She is the noble one who gave birth to him who had given birth to all the worlds ; she is the one, who, because I was born, renounced all the wealth of royalty.' Guha fell at Kausalya's feet and sobbed, whereupon the Queen asked who he was. In reply Bharatha told her that he was Guha, the sweetest friend of Rama and the elder brother of Lakshmana, Satrugna and himself. As Guha wept, the eyes of Bharatha and Satrugna became wet with tears. Kausalya comforted them all in a song, which breathes the very spirit of serene benediction. As we read the song in the original, the air becomes vibrant with a thousand angelic wings, which waft a balmy breeze over the bruised heart of Man. The original song is given below in Roman script :

Naivīr alīr, maintīr !
 inittuyarāl ; naṭiranṭw
 kāṭunōk ki
 Meivīrar peyarṇṭaṭuvum
 nalamāyitrām anṭrē
 vilangal ṭiṇṭo!
 Kaivīrak kaḷiranaya
 kālai ivan ṭannoṭum
 Kalanṭu nīvir
 aivīrum oruvīrāi
 ahaḷiṭṭai nedungālam
 aḷiṭṭir endrāl.

Kamban's variety of musical accomplishments is prodigious. In fact, he works in larger musical units than any English poet. In this stanza, which consists of four lines, each line comprises 19 or 20 syllables. To be able to control so many syllables and words at once is a sure sign of exceptional mastery, and to be able to arrange them in such a musical order as to set them to a key appropriate to the relevant emotion is the most conclusive evidence of his supremacy in poetry.

Beethoven said once that Goethe was in D-major. Likewise, everything and everybody seem to present themselves to Kamban in a certain key and Kamban communicates them in a key most appropriate to each by resorting to musical phrases and rhythmi-

cal devices which produce the intended impression on a sensitive and penetrating reader. None of this word-magic of Kamban or the regality of his tone can come through in a translation, but lest the narrative should be interrupted, the following version of Kausalya's utterance is given.

' Grieve you not, my sons, grieve no more,
it is as well that the warriors of Truth
renounced the Realm and came to the wilderness ;
Befriend this mighty warrior,
 who stands like a heroic elephant
 with a trunk strong as the hills ;
and befriending him,
may the Five of you, becoming one,
govern this Earth
for many and many a year.'

In the mellowness of her grief, Kausalya's mother-heart embraces the lowly hunter as one of her own blue-blooded sons. There is in this song a certain epic nobility of thought, which lifts the reader above human pettiness.

Pointing to Sumitra, who looked like Virtue herself, Guha asked, ' Pray, tell me who's this lady brimming over with love.' And Bharatha replied, ' She is the Junior Queen of the one, who died in order that unfaltering Truth might live. She is the great one, who begot that inseparable brother and showed that adorable Rama had a brother, too.'

After this introduction, Kamban feels embarrassed that Guha's attention might fall on Kaikeyi. As that distinguished aesthete T. K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar observes, this feeling of embarrassment is brought out with superb poignancy in the next stanza.

Her spouse gone to the cremation ground,
her son gone down the sea of grief,
Rama—that ocean of Grace—
gone to the merciless jungle,
the woman, who guaged
 with the wanton cruelty of her mind,
all the worlds, which, of yore,
Mystic Vishnu had guaged with his height—
pointing to this woman,
Guha said, ' Pray, tell me who she is.'

Now, Kamban makes Bharatha give vent to all the pent-up fury of his mind. He replies :

She is the Author of all evil,
 the foster-mother of Revenge,
 she is the one
 who has ground me down mercilessly
 despite my lying in her accursed womb so long,
 she is the one, the only one,
 who has a beaming grief-free face
 in a world where all bodies seem all dead.
 Guess you not who she is ?
 The one who stands this wise
 is the one who has generated me.

These were bitter words, which created an awkward situation for the entire Assembly. The Poet makes haste to relieve them and the reader from this predicament by bringing down the curtain on the boat scene. He hurriedly changes gear from a long ponderous metre to a short snappy one.

Even this pitiless woman
 Guha regarded as his mother,
 and with his holy hands he saluted her.
 The boat, like a wingless swan,
 swiftly reached ashore.

Rare dramatic skill has been employed by the Poet in retrieving a situation, which in lesser hands, might well have degenerated into bathos. The similarity between a boat with in-drawn oars and a wingless swan is so startling that the attention of the reader is diverted from a distressing predicament to the comeliness of an apt simile and to the happy need for disembarkation.

Heaven on Earth

After dismounting from the boat, Bharatha and his people trudge along on foot to the hermitage of Sage Bharadwaja, who receives them with open arms and blesses them and entertains them to a feast. Out of the richness of his tapas, the Sage sends out a thought, whereupon Heaven comes floating downward and settles itself softly upon the Earth.

Leaving Bharatha and his retinue in this enchanted Heaven-on-Earth, the Poet takes us to the Chitrakuta hills, where Rama,

Sita and Lakshmana are holidaying. One day as Lakshmana was sitting in the courtyard of his cottage, he saw something moving hazily in the dim distance. Closeby stood a cliff, which looked like a tapering tongue of flame shot out by the Earth. Climbing up the cliff and standing on its summit, Lakshmana looked northward and saw a sea of arches and bows. There was little doubt that it was Bharatha's army on the march. Rash, devoted and easily excitable like Guha, Lakshmana misjudged Bharatha's motive and lost no time in taking hurried steps to resist the enemy. Down to the ground he jumped and stamping the rocks with his feet, he raised a cloud of rock-dust. Rushing to Rama, he roared, 'Unrespecting Bharatha is coming down upon you with Ayodhya's extensive hordes.' Donning his coat-of-arms and locking it tight, he lifted his bow and touching Rama's feet reverentially, he said he would presently rout Bharatha's army. In his mind's eye, Lakshmana sees an Armageddon, the bloody scenes of which he describes with picturesque and war-like relish.

'And you will see rivers of blood
flowing and gurgitating into all the seas,
wiping out all Evil,
upturning and rolling those Island-elephants,
sweeping down chariots.'

Kamban, who knows how to turn the smallest details to dramatic account, would not let this blood-river go to waste. He makes Lakshmana say :

'And you will see, too,
red demons, slit-eyed dwarfs,
and headless trunks
swimming in the surging blood-tide
and dancing gaily, like the celestials,
and shouting,
"The Kingdom has become yours!"'

'By command of the King, Bharatha rules the world, and by my command', says Lakshmana, 'he will start reigning in Hell.'

Rama is distressed to hear these terrible threats. He says :

'Scriptures, no matter how numerous,
can only *talk* about virtue.
But, Bharatha *acts* virtue.
What he does is Virtue

What he does not, is not.
 You have thought not of this,
 because of your love for me.
 Think you ill
 of that God of lofty Righteousness,
 that Axle of Perfection ?
 He's come, my boy,
 to pay his respects to me,
 and this you will discover presently.'

As Rama spoke thus, Bharatha took Satrugna and rushed towards Rama in his eagerness to have a close look at him. His hands uplifted in reverent salutation, his body sagging, his eyes dissolving in tears, Bharatha came like a painting done to declare, 'This is the portrait of Agony!'

Rama gazed at Bharatha from top to toe and turning to Lakshmana said,

'Look! my bow-twanging brother,
 look with both your eyes,
 at the "War-thirsty" Bharatha,
 leading the "martial" battalions!'

Lakshmana stood startled, his abusive words were stilled, his tears dropped to the ground along with his fury and his bow. Bharatha's figure is thin and worn-out with grief. Rushing towards Rama, he complains,

'You have thought not of virtue,
 you have thrown compassion overboard ;
 you have abdicated the law.'

Then, he falls at Rama's feet as if he has seen, face to face, his dead father come back to life. With his tears Rama drenches the matted locks of Bharatha, and lifting him tenderly, presses him close to his bosom. This spectacle moves Kamban to exclaim :

Thus did love-based Virtue
 embrace
 the Repertory of all that is just.

Then Rama asks him, 'How fares the mighty King?', and Bharatha replies, 'Sire, he is no more. Separation from you is the disease that killed him. The boon obtained by black Kaikeyi,

my begetter, is the Yama that choked up his life.' Hearing these words, Rama's eyes whirled and so did his mind, both revolving like a whirligig. Down he sank to the ground—'the one that was greater than the greatest.'

Sage Vasishta comforts him by saying, 'Death, too, like birth is a function of Nature. Forget you this truth—you that have mastered all the extant scriptures?' Deriving comfort from his words, Rama goes into a jungle stream nearby, has a bath and performs oblations with water thrice.

Limitations of space prevent the writer from reproducing the moving scenes that follow. Bharatha requests Rama to take over the sceptre. Rama tells him that he will carry out his father's command by living in the jungle for fourteen years and that, meanwhile, Bharatha shall rule the Kingdom at his command.

Bharatha's Crown

As Bharatha mused over the fourteen long years that lay ahead, grief gripped him again, and his mind turned towards the feet of God, which symbolize Divine Grace, the Grace that moves the whole Universe and all events within it. 'Pray', he said, 'Give me the blessed sandals you wear on your holy feet.' And Rama handed over the sandals which could bless Bharatha with the bliss of the Here and the Hereafter. The one with the weeping eyes placed the footwear on his head with ritualistic devotion, thinking to himself, 'This is my Crown'. He prostrated himself at Rama's feet and left, his frame dazzling with the dust on which Rama's feet had trodden.

With the departure of the visitors, the curtain is rung down on Ayodhya Kanda and rises upon Aranya Kanda, the book of Forests.

ARANYA KANDA

The Redeeming Feet

THE three leave the Chitrakuta hill and go to the forest called Dandakaranya, where they encounter a monstrous giant called Virada, who threatens to swallow the two Princes. Rama kicks the giant and at the touch of his feet, the giant recovers his former form and recounts how he had been Tumburu, a musician in the Court of Indra, and how Indra had punished him for his lust by cursing him to become a demon and recover his old form at the touch of Rama's feet. Recalling this curse and his redemption from it, Virada sings some beautiful hymns in praise of Rama's grace.

If these are Thy feet,
which the scriptures expound
and which spread throughout the Universe,
how vast and lovely must be Thy total form!

God resides not only in inanimate Nature but also in the life and consciousness of all animate beings. But it is a mystery that these beings know Him not. The law of reciprocity does not seem to govern the relationship between the Maker and the made!

There is no calf which knows not her mother,
and the mother-cow knows her calf as well ;
Oh! Lord, thou art the Mother of the Universe
and thou knowest thy children, every one of them,
but, alas! how comes it about
thy children know thee not!

What magic Ignorance blinds their eyes?
Tell me, Thou that canst come without coming.

God, who lives in the hearts of all, the ignorant and the wise, is perceived only when divine wisdom dawns upon the ignorant. It cannot therefore be said that He comes in only at the moment of perception. He is already in the heart even before He is perceived. It is this truth that the Poet presents in a profoundly paradoxical form by making Virada say, 'Thou, who canst come without coming.' Objective presence of God, according to the Poet, precedes the subjective perception thereof.

After the departure of Virada, the trio move towards the hermitage of Sage Sarapangar. At the threshold of the Ashram, Rama sees the insignia of Indra, the King of the Celestials, and goes into the Ashram to see if Indra is inside. In the Ramayana of Valmiki, as soon as Indra sights Rama, he hurriedly leaves the Ashram without meeting Rama lest the meeting should delay the fulfilment of Rama's mission on Earth. But, Kamban makes Indra meet Rama in order that he might express his gratitude to the Lord for having condescended, at the instance of the Celestials, to take birth as Man for the purpose of destroying the forces of Evil. The meeting thus contrived gives the Poet an opportunity to explain earthly events against a cosmic background and thereby widen the earth-bound perspective of Man.

Indra sings the praise of Rama :

‘Thou art the Light
that penetrates and soaks everything
and yet remains unsoaked.

Harassed by the enemy
we sought refuge at Thy feet
and implored Thee ;
and in fulfilment of the boon Thou gavest
Thou hast arrived, Oh, Lord!
Imagine Thy two lotus feet
now planted on the Earth!

Bearing the Cross

Indra is moved by God's compassion for his devotees, by His renouncing his multi-dimensional world, and his choosing to bind Himself in Time and Space, and subjecting Himself to the indignity of human weal and human woe—just for the redemption of Man.

He continues his hallelujah :

There is none
who is out of touch with Thy God-stuff,
and none,
who is fully in touch with it ;
It is neither Light nor Darkness
neither Above nor Below,
It is not without ageing,
nor does it age ;

It has neither beginning, middle nor end
 neither Afore nor After :
 Lord! if such be the condition of Thy Being,
 who could blame Thee,
 if Thou wouldst refuse to redeem us
 by coming upon the Earth,
 bearing the burden of a bow
 and treading the ground
 with Thy crimson feet
 reddening with pain ?
 Oh! the One that sleeps
 in the black sea of Infinity,
 What recompense dost Thou get
 for redeeming us from sorrow ?

Measuring Infinity

In the intensity of his devotion, Indra fabricates a fantastically huge cup of imagination in order to measure Infinity, but he realises that the cup is infinitely inadequate for the purpose. He says :

Let Brahma, the Creator of the worlds,
 mould out of the stuff of all the planets
 an immense cup of measurement,
 and standing agile,
 let him measure Thee for aeons and aeons ;
 Thy immeasurable grace would still remain
 undiminished and unmeasured.
 With the Earth as the bowl,
 the Ocean as the Curd
 and Mount Meru as the Churner,
 Thou hast churned the Ocean
 with Thy lotus hands aching
 and given us immortalizing nectar.
 How, then, can the Rakshasas help
 becoming Thy slaves!

Rama, Lakshmana and Sita now leave for the mountain resort of Agasthya, which is criss-crossed with cascades of water ' sweeter far than freshly-extracted honey '.

Yogic Elephant

Saint Agasthya's erudition was as profound as it was encyclopaedic. He was an authority not only on Art, Poetry and Spiritual

Culture but also on Science, Medicine, Weaponry, Dam-building, Irrigation and other branches of secular knowledge. People from distant lands used to come to the Podikai hills in Tirunelveli District to study at the University of Agasthya. He was a powerhouse of enlightenment and culture. As he heard that Rama was in the vicinity of his hermitage, he rushed towards him to welcome him, unlike Valmiki's Agasthya, who asks a messenger to bring Rama into his presence.

The tradition in the Tamil country is that Agasthya published in the Tamil language several works summing up all available human knowledge, though these books were subsequently lost while a good part of southern Tamil Nadu was submerged in the sea. Kamban, therefore, describes Agasthya as the One who, like Vishnu, scaled the heights of the Universe, with the long rod of Tamil.

In the next song, Kamban refers to a legend of symbolic significance. Long, long ago, there was a race of Asuras, who gathered all the spiritual and ethical treasures of the world and sank along with them into the depths of the Ocean. Thereupon, the celestials went to Agasthya and appealed to him to retrieve the sunken treasures. Agasthya responded to this appeal; he took the waters of the Ocean in the palm of his hand and drank them dry; then at the request of the gods, he ejected the Ocean waters from his stomach through his mouth, and made the hidden treasures available to mankind again.

Rasikamani T. K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar interprets this legend in the light of what Mirandola did five centuries ago. Greek Art and Literature were so subtle and intricate that the Italians, who were out of touch with Greek tradition, grievously misinterpreted them. A horde of Italian Grammarians and Commentators, who had no aesthetic sensibility, allowed their barren intellect to play upon the exquisite works of Greek Art, and blacked-out all that was fine and graceful in Greek Culture. In effect, these misinterpreters had become a race of anti-artistic Asuras, who, by their lack of perception, set at naught the brilliant achievements of the Greek mind. In this period of darkness Mirandola was born. He made a profound study of Greek Art, showed up the falsity of the Italian Grammarians and Commentators, and brought to light the inner soul of Greek Culture. Frequently, we come across such phenomena in the history of culture, a period of

great artistic and spiritual activity being overwhelmed and succeeded by a dark period of misinterpretation. T. K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar thinks with reason that Agasthya must have extricated Art and Wisdom from the grip of the barbarians and that the legend relating to his drinking up the ocean and then spewing it out at the behest of the celestials must be a symbolic reference to the service of rectification and re-interpretation rendered by Agasthya.

In the next song, Kamban refers again in symbolic language, to the spiritual feats of Agasthya. Men, eager to seek the Unitive Way, approached Agasthya and asked, 'Which is the painless path leading to God?' Instead of giving a verbal reply, Agasthya gave a convincing demonstration.

Upon the Magic Hill,
which scraped the skies and had around it
a swinging garland of creeping clouds,
Agasthya planted his feet and ascended ;
at once, the hill sank lower and lower
till it reached the nether-world,
and he stood triumphant on top of it,
like a Yogic elephant.

This demonstration must have brought home to the interrogator of Agasthya the way to solve the central problem in spiritual evolution. The one obstacle that stands between Man and God is the human Ego, which has been referred to by Kamban as the huge, sky-scraping Magic Hill. But, this hill, though illusory, is nevertheless an almost insurmountable projection of the human mind and is overspread with the clouds of unknowing like lust, anger and delusion. The moment a man puts his foot firmly upon it and submerges it, he realizes God. This is a mystical process, which, unlike the process of Hatha Yoga, involves no bodily pain and is commended by Agasthya as the 'painless path' towards God.

One other Agasthya legend is narrated by Kamban and it is presumably based on some geological upheaval that affected South India. The wedding of Lord Siva and Parvati was scheduled to take place in the Himalayas. The whole of mankind rushed there to witness the wedding, with the result that the Himalayas, unable to bear the unprecedented burden, started sinking. At once, Lord

Siva sent for the diminutive Agasthya and requested him to hurry to the South. Agasthya obliged by shifting to the Podikai Hills as a counter-weight, whereupon the sinking Himalayas came up and the equilibrium was restored. What is weighed in this legendary balance is, not masses, but values, and Agasthya's value as a cultural force is audaciously equated with that of Siva and the rest of mankind.

It is this saint of prodigious learning and spirituality that hurries forth reverently to receive Rama, who has stepped into the premises of his Ashram. As Agasthya rushes out, he thinks that Rama's arrival marks the culmination and fruition of all the tapas he has performed. He is thrilled he is going to have a vision of God in the shape of Rama and he proclaims ecstatically :

' Let Brahma put the four vociferous Vedas
and the allied scriptures
on the huge grinding-stone of Wisdom
and let him grind them hard
for days and days on end ;
Yet he cannot grasp Reality.
But that Unknown Quantity is come here bodily
to hold converse with me,
face to face! '

Kamban celebrates the meeting of the two in a magnificent song :

The towering figure that came
bowed at the feet
of the figure that stood still ;
Clasping him with love
and with joyous tears gushing out of his eyes,
the saint uttered warm words of welcome—
the saint, who had achieved immortality
by singing poems
in the ever-living Tamil of the South.

Rama's arrival was celebrated by the sages in Agasthya's hermitage. A feast was held in Rama's honour and after the feast, Agasthya spoke, requesting Rama to sojourn in his hermitage. Rama pledged himself to wipe out the forces of Evil and sought Agasthya's permission to go beyond the hermitage and stay at a strategic spot where he could meet the Rakshasas half-way and

confront them. Agasthya approved of this plan and gave Rama the bow and quiver of Siva, which had been in his worshipful custody for a long number of years. He gifted to him also the mighty shaft with which Siva had destroyed the three aerial cities. After making these gifts, Agasthya suggested that Rama might take up his abode in Panchavati, where the Godavari takes its rise. Kamban's Agasthya gives a vivid description of the scenic magnificence in which Panchavati is set.

Up-rising trees, and above them,
 Up-rising bamboos, and above them,
 Up-rising mountain peaks ;
 Cool groves out-bulging at the flanks,
 with flower-clusters swinging
 and chumming together ;
 a soft stream crawling by,
 with sleepy wavelets rippling—
 In this sacred setting, my son,
 nestles Panchavati.

With this description, the saint bids farewell to the trio, who, after receiving the sage's blessings, go northward to Panchavati.

Miles and miles they walked,
 crossing
 lovely streams—some lying, some standing up—
 and mountains—some marching past in a row
 and others sitting around jostlingly—
 till at last they descried the King of Eagles.

Mother Bird

Out of the mountain range juts out a black hill and out of the black hill juts out a promontory, on which Jatayu, the King of Eagles, is perched. Austere Valmiki sets Jatayu on the branch of a banyan tree and furnishes no description of the bird except that it is huge and powerful. But Kamban lavishes his great descriptive power and vividness of portraiture upon the bird, which in the course of the next few scenes is going to lay down its very life in the defence of Sita. Well-versed in the pure arts, poised and anchored in learning, truthful and spotless, incisive in intellect, he looks far, far ahead, like a seasoned statesman, through his tiny, little eyes. In Valmiki's Ramayana, Jatayu introduces himself to Rama and

Lakshmana as a great friend of their father, but fails to enquire after Dasaratha. On the other hand, Kamban by making Jatayu enquire about the health of Dasaratha, creates an occasion for celebrating in a most moving elegy the inspiring friendship between the bird and the man. The result is Jatayu is brought nearer to the reader by imagination and dramatic sympathy and the reader's feeling is effectively enlisted.

Jatayu guided the three to Panchavati under the sheltering shade of his huge, widespread wings and after pointing out to them the spot prescribed by Agasthya, went on a reconnoitring flight. Keeping his thoughts centred on his golden-breasted daughter-in-law and his two sons, Jatayu started patrolling the vicinity. Kamban, who has the incomparable ability to get out of the human shell, now looks at the three from inside the tender heart and through the anxious eyes of the bird and says :

Jatayu watched the three
as the mother-bird would watch
her fledglings inside the nest.

It is through this ability that Kamban succeeds in endowing this imaginary and legendary character with life, passion and vigour, and in bridging the gulf between Man and Bird.

Surpanaka's Bizarre Love

As Rama and Sita spend their days joyously in these romantic surroundings, an interloper crosses their lives and forces the pace of events. A giantess by name Surpanaka, the younger sister of Ravana, reigns supreme over the huge forest near Panchavati. Savage scheming Destiny brought her where Rama lived. Rama was born to liquidate the Rakshasa race and Surpanaka was born, according to the Poet, to give support to Rama in the fulfilment of this mission. The meeting of the two is consequently of the most momentous meaning in the epic. As Surpanaka sets eyes upon Rama, she feels that his is a charm she has never seen before. She falls deliriously in love with him. She wonders why such a handsome figure, who ought to give himself up to the pursuits of pleasure, should languish and wilt away in the performance of austerities. She asks herself :

What meditation has Meditation performed
to tempt him into meditation!

Valmiki's Surpanaka, who is red-haired, big-bellied and repulsively ugly, fails, in the heat of passion, to change her form before going into Rama's presence. But, Kamban's Surpanaka is crafty enough to use her admitted powers of magic and assume the seductive figure of a lovely damsel before appearing in front of him. She uttered an abracadabra and at once, she got a face and body that out-lustred the Moon. In a song, which has a lilting rhythm and swing, Kamban ushers Surpanaka, draped in a glistening and trailing saree, into the presence of Rama. She comes softly, gliding like a peacock, with seductive movements of the appropriate limbs. Her golden complexion resembles the velvety and tender shoots put forth by the ever-obliging tree of Heaven—Kalpaka. Her crimson lips appear to drip with aphrodisiac honey. Behind the lips is a string of lustrous pearls. She endows herself with the coy eyes of the gazelle. It is a pity that nothing of the seductiveness of the original can be decanted into the translation. The ethereal agility of the ballerina has been cunningly recaptured in the *materia poetica* of Kamban; and the beauty, which is made visible in this song, becomes audible in the next. The tinkling of Surpanaka's anklets, the chiming of the little bells strung on to her waistlet, the clinking of her necklace and the buzzing of the golden bees hovering over the flowers in her tresses—all these competing sounds proclaim, 'Here comes a maid!'

Though Kamban can sing about love with great intensity and truth, he portrays in several songs the bizarre love of Surpanaka with a keen sense of humour. Jilted by Rama, she scoops out frozen snow with which she plasters her shooting breasts but it melts like butter thrown on scorching rock. Ultimately, her violent flirtatiousness was punished by Lakshmana cutting off her nose, ear and 'rebellious' nipples. She wailed 'like the big drum, which, by order of the God of Death, proclaimed the extinction of the Rakshasa race.'

Surpanaka belonged to the Imperial family of Ravana. She had behind her the majesty and panoply of the Rakshasa Empire. She was used to tormenting others, but not to be tormented. That a mere man should have humiliated her provoked her sovereign shame. The offender remained not only unpunished but was also gloating over his crime, while the sister of His Imperial Majesty was rolling in the dust. Kara and Dhooshana, the Rakshasas

guarding the forest by command of Ravana, learn of this indignity and give battle to Rama, but are destroyed by him.

The City of Lanka

After their destruction, Surpanaka left for the City of Lanka. It is at this juncture that Kamban introduces Ravana to us in all his pomp and glory. He is portrayed, not as a super-Rakshasa, symbolizing the powers of unrelieved Evil ; but as a noble, courageous, spiritually great and benevolent and highly cultured person, the only foible vitiating his personality and bringing about his downfall being his misdirected and blinding lust. In his Court, mighty Kings move around him in concentric circles with their folded hands stretched over their heads, knowing not which way and when he would cast his glance at them. Tumburu, Heaven's Minstrel, celebrates in sweet music the valour of his shoulders ; Narada caresses the ear with music, which pours out of the strings of his Veena, without swerving from the purity and loftiness of the ancient classical tradition. All this music stops as Surpanaka bursts into the Court of Ravana with the speed and fury of a hurricane that would churn up the oceans. Ravana is appalled by the indignity and mutilation inflicted upon his royal sister and he asks her in a stentorian voice, ' Whose act is this ? ' Surpanaka, who was deeply in love with the culprits, replies, ' They are humans, who, whipping out their swords, mutilated me. But, they resemble the God of Love. And can there be two Cupids co-existing in the self-same world ? ' These words of adoration were suspiciously free from any bitterness for the mutilators and must have intrigued Ravana. But, Surpanaka side-tracked his suspicion by giving him an enchanting description of Sita. Her design was to exploit Ravana's notorious lust and induce him to annex Sita and leave herself free to monopolize Rama and Lakshmana. The voluptuous description given by Surpanaka of Sita's charms set Ravana's heart ablaze. In the delirium of love, Ravana kept awake the whole night, planning to get at Sita. He sent for his uncle, Mareecha, and forced him, much against his will, to wreak vengeance upon Rama by separating him from Sita, and thereby help him to kidnap her. Mareecha assumed the shape of a golden deer, whose golden rays lighted up Heaven and Earth, and approached Panchavati. As he came near Panchavati, Sita was coming out of the hermitage.

Her fragile waist twisting,
she moved round with a delicate tread,
plucking flowers
with her hands,
which were verily like unplucked flowers.

The original of this song shows how Kamban sinks his soul in the gracious movement of Sita and makes living gossamer poetry out of it. In this scene, Sita cajoles Rama into capturing the deer with his own hands instead of allowing Lakshmana to catch it. There is something seductive and peculiarly feminine about the sound-patterns of the songs in which this scene abounds, the vowels caressingly outsing the consonants. As Rama went after the deer, it pricked up its ears, and pressing its four limbs against its chest, galloped high ; it galloped faster than wind and mind as if imparting speed to speed. It climbed up the hill, leapt into a bunch of clouds and whenever Rama paused, tired, it would come within reach of his hand, and feigning to stand still, would go far, far away. Its tantalizing movement resembled that of flower-bedecked harlots, who project goldward their fluctuating affections. As the reader is absorbed in the physical movements of the deer, Kamban transports him, by means of an apt but shocking simile, to a different plane of reality and makes him see the mental movements of the sad 'gay' girls who ply for hire. With an arrow, shaped like a long leaf, Rama shot the deer. The deer assumed the voice of Rama, yelled for help and fell down dead. Now, Rama realised that the deer was part of a deeper plot, of which Lakshmana had forewarned him.

The Abduction

Sita was beguiled by the false voice of distress into thinking that Rama was in peril. She admonished the unwilling Lakshmana and forced him to rush to Rama's rescue. In the absence of Rama and Lakshmana, Ravana came in the form of an old and infirm Sanyasi and lifting Sita along with the piece of ground on which she stood, put her on his chariot and shot up into the sky. The lamentation of Sita caught the ear of Jatayu. A ferocious duel ensued between the bird and the Rakshasa, in the course of which Ravana cut off with his sword both the wings of Jatayu, and Jatayu fell down unconscious. Ravana carried Sita swiftly to Lanka and fearing to touch her holy body, kept her in detention,

surrounded by black giantesses in a lovely park called Asoka Vana.
Says the Poet :

Sitting amidst a cluster of black giantesses,
Sita shone,
like a coruscating arc of lightning
that tears asunder a dense cluster of rain-clouds.

Meanwhile, Rama, whose mind was filled with forebodings, rushed back to the hermitage and was shocked at the disappearance of Sita. He was 'like the soul, which having parted from its body, comes back in search of its cage and finds it missing.' He stood helpless, bearing the burden of a mighty bow and a sea of arrows! Lakshmana pointed out to him the track of a chariot and both tottered along the track in distress. At some distance, Rama saw a gruesome sight and rushed forward to find Jatayu lying unconscious in a pool of blood. Torrential tears shot forth from Rama's eyes as he fell on the sacred body of Jatayu and fainted. Lakshmana took in the palms of his hands the 'cloud-kissed' waters of a nearby cascade and sprayed the same on Rama's face. Rama recovered consciousness and started lamenting over the fate of Jatayu. Consciousness stirred slightly in the mind of the King of Birds and opening his eyes, Jatayu rejoiced that he had wiped out the stigma attaching to him and felt as if 'he had regained his two severed wings and the seven worlds'. With the beak that broke to pieces the Crown of Ravana, Jatayu tenderly kissed Rama and Lakshmana again and again.

Jatayu was hesitant to describe to Rama the manner in which Ravana had carried away Sita. Hesitating a good deal and plucking up courage, he referred to the abduction scene in an oblique manner, by saying that Rama should extirpate the vicious weeds called Rakshasas. As he stammered out these words, Rama was able to guess that some giant must have abducted Sita and cut the wings of Jatayu, when he went to her rescue. Rama flew into a rage and said he would wipe out all the worlds along with the Celestials who had been idly looking on. Jatayu, who was baffled by the delirious condition of Rama's mind, proceeded to perform a major operation to cure him of his uncontrollable rage. He knew that stinging words would bruise Rama's heart but he could not help using those words, because those words alone could have the desired result. He blamed Rama for having brought disgrace to

the family by leaving poor Sita behind and running after a deer with glittering horns. 'The blame is yours,' he declared, 'Not that of the world.' These hot words touched Rama to the quick and brought down the pitch of his rage. Rama said, 'Sire, Please tell me in what direction the giant went.' By the time these words were uttered, the Eagle King became giddy and speechless and collapsed and died.

Though Valmiki's Jatayu discloses to Rama the name of Sita's abductor as Ravana, Kamban introduces an element of dramatic suspense by making Jatayu breathe his last before disclosing the abductor's identity. Further, at the sight of Jatayu lying in a pool of blood, Valmiki's Rama suspects that the cannibalistic eagle must have killed Sita and devoured her and, therefore, attempts to shoot him with an arrow. At that juncture, Valmiki's Jatayu appeals to Rama not to kill him and then narrates to him how he had been maimed by Ravana while he went to Sita's rescue. On the other hand, Kamban's Rama has nothing but the highest adoration for Jatayu, whom he regards as the alter ego of his own father, and the beauty of the intensely tender relationship between the two is not marred by the slightest suspicion of the kind Valmiki's Rama entertained. By his intensely dramatic and human treatment, Kamban has made out of Jatayu an unforgettable character.

KISHKINDA KANDA

After performing the funeral of Jatayu, who had filled the void created by the death of Dasaratha, Rama and Lakshmana went far and wide in search of Sita. Ultimately, they came to the mountainous region of Kishkinda, where Hanuman received the two with great cordiality. He was enchanted by their grace and he thought they ought to be visitors from Heaven. He was so transformed by them that his doors of perception were cleansed and all the things of the Earth appeared to have taken on a new meaning and loveliness. At the touch of their feet, the fire-spitting pebbles softened and seemed to have turned into wine-filled flowers. In whichever direction they went, all things—grasses and trees—bent low as if bowing in reverence for them. Hanuman exclaimed, 'Are these the Gods of Virtue!'

Rama found from the few words uttered by Hanuman that he was a highly refined personality, in whom there was a combination of rare qualities—power, fullness of mind, learning, steadfastness and native intelligence. In fact, Kamban describes Hanuman as having come into the world 'to relieve Virtue of its loneliness.' Rama told Lakshmana, 'Perfection, which cannot be captured either by Poetry with its net of words or by Unitive Wisdom with its net of mysticism, has assumed the shape of this monkey and come down upon the Earth.'

Hanuman went to his master, Sugriva, the King of monkeys and told him about the noble ancestry of Rama, his supreme sense of sacrifice and his present predicament. Sugriva was moved by what Hanuman told him and longed to meet Rama at once. Both went down a zig-zag mountain path and as they turned a bend, they saw Rama sitting at a distance. Sugriva stood transfixed as he saw the figure of Rama. After casting a long lingering look at Rama, he said, 'The Lord of all the Celestials has come in the guise of Man, and by becoming Man, has established the victory of the human species over the gods.'

Rama received Sugriva as his friend and ally. When he learnt that Vali, the elder brother of Sugriva, had annexed the latter's wife and was persecuting him, Rama readily gave the assurance that he would destroy Vali.

The Single Combat

A single combat ensued and the brothers fought ferociously. Ultimately, Sugriva received a knock-out blow from Vali and fell down, exhausted. Just at that juncture, an arrow came from behind the nearby bush and pierced the chest of Vali. Blood welled forth from his chest and gushed down like a cascade with a gurgling sound. This sight moved Sugriva and he fell down unconscious, shedding copious tears of love. Due to profuse bleeding and shock, Vali also fell down. Excruciating pain made him explode with anger. He plucked the mighty arrow from his chest and saying, 'I will break it in twain', he stood up. Then his eyes were startled to see the inscription of a name on the arrow. It was the sacred name of Rama, 'the primordial mantric word' that can redeem the three worlds, the unique incantation that can bring on Heavenly bliss, the Elixir that cures now and here the accumulated *karma* of ages'.

Vali's Impeachment of Rama

Rama came from behind the bush and saw the pathetic spectacle of Vali lying wounded and bleeding, and his younger brother, unable to bear this sight, falling down unconscious. Vali, who was a great devotee and hero, saw the lovely figure of Rama. He was more concerned with Rama straying from Virtue than with his own mortal wound. Addressing Rama, he said, 'You are the son of the pure one, who laid down his life for the sake of Truth and you are the brother of noble Bharatha. Your life has been an illustration of mother-love and mercy. If one guards others from evil but does evil oneself, does evil cease to be evil?' Vali's indictment gathered momentum and he gathered into one voice all the varieties of sarcasm and cynicism that Rama's unchivalrous act appeared to deserve, and he gave them added force by clarity, logic and wit. He asked, 'Has the Code of Manu prescribed that when a Rakshasa indulges in abduction of your wife, an unconnected Monkey-King shall be killed? If you should cover yourself with infamy, whoever is fit to wear the mantle of Fame?' With further loss of blood, Vali threw restraint to the winds and started declaiming violently: 'You became bewildered perhaps after parting with Sita of ambrosial sweetness. What a senseless act have you done!' Referring to Rama's royal clan, which claimed descent from the Sun, Vali said, 'Perhaps because the Moon

crawling across the sky, bears a dark, blemishing stain, you have put upon the pedigree of the Sun a corresponding stain which will endure for ever! Oh, gallant Hero, you have destroyed, not Vali, but the fence that surrounds kingly duty and keeps guard over it.' The climax of Vali's wrath is reached in the following song:

Was the art of archery invented
that you might send your arrow, not face to face,
but from a place of hiding
against the chest of an unarmed person!
Fie upon your wife, who has been annexed by another!
Fie upon your blooming bow, which stands sullied by your act!

Realization of Divinity

There is reason to suppose that a number of songs succeeding this song have been interpolated in the *Kamba Ramayana* by fanatical devotees for the purpose of defending Rama against the formidable charges levelled by Vali. These songs of apologia, which do not bear the authentic ring of Kamban, attribute to Rama defensive arguments which are insipid and unconvincing. The late Rasikamani T. K. Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, who had an unerring instinct for poetry, and whose inspired exposition of Kamban has profoundly influenced the writer of this monograph, rightly rejected these songs as spurious and put forward the hypothesis that Kamban's Rama must have made an unqualified admission of his guilt and courageously apologized to Vali for having mortally wounded him from behind the bush. Rama's courage to own up his mistake convinced Vali of the divinity of Rama, and Rama rose high in Vali's estimation on this account. Vali realized that he had misunderstood Sugriva and harassed him. He asked Sugriva to realize the divinity of Rama and have him as his guide. He also appealed to Rama to give asylum to Sugriva.

At this stage, Angada, the son of Vali, came running down the slope of the hill with tears in his eyes and fell, lamenting, upon his dying father. The Poet says he fell like a lightning falling from the Heavens, upon Vali, who lay like the Moon upon the Earth.

Vali was touched by the profound agony of his son and he asked him to give up his childhood's sobs and learn that the peerless Substance of Ultimate Reality had, with its feet treading on the Earth, with its hands bearing a bow, assumed a form perceptible to the senses. He added, 'Rama is the Elixir, my son, which will

cure us of the disease of birth. He considers the maturity of souls and confers grace upon them, each according to his deserts. You will flourish by keeping his holy feet on your head.' Then he turned to Rama and said, 'Angada is like the fire that will burn out the Rakshasa cotton. I entrust him to your protection.' At once, Angada fell at the feet of Rama, and Rama stretched out his golden sword to Angada and said, 'Bear this'. The moment he said this, Vali renounced his earthly life and 'assumed the life of the world beyond'.

The bereaved Tara became inconsolable. Kamban uses words of austere intensity to bring out her great grief. In her lamentation, Tara resorts to a piece of devastating logic to shatter the delusion that she and Vali had been dwelling in the hearts of each other.

Oh! Lord of battle-happy shoulders!
Were I a dweller of your heart,
the arrow that pierced it
ought to have sucked my life, too!
and were you a dweller of my heart,
you ought to be alive!
Neither has lived truly in the heart of the other.

SUNDARA KANDA

The Canto of Beauty

Kamban begins the Canto of Beauty (Sundara Kanda) with a search for Sita. Monkey couriers have been despatched in all directions. Hanuman crossed the seas and reached Lanka in the evening. The City presents a beautiful spectacle and Hanuman marvels at the loveliness of the buildings in the City.

Are they built out of sunlight,
 inlaid with flashes of lightning!
or made out of molten gold
 studded with pearls and gems!
Hard to know what stuff they are made on!
Oh! those towers pierce the giant clouds
 and keep knocking against the Moon!

The Lamp of Chastity

Hanuman went round from palace to palace in search of Sita, peering through the carved windows and doors, but she was nowhere to be seen. Disappointed, he came out of the City to Asoka Vana, climbed up a tree and perched himself upon it. Some distance away from the tree there was a clearing, where Sita was sitting, revolving a variety of sad thoughts in her mind. Anything utterly black like a dark cloud or the black paint on the eyes of girls upset her mind, as it reminded her of Rama. Expecting Rama, she surveyed all the quarters of the globe, rotating her eyes hopefully. Hope would give place to despair as she wondered if Rama knew that Ravana had abducted her. She would recall to mind the magnificent qualities of Rama and the several experiences she had shared with him in common. To the poor hunter, who plied boats across the waters of the Ganges, he had said, 'My brother is your brother; comrade am I to you; this lady is your sister-in-law.' Recalling this redemptive friendship, Sita would writhe in grief.

It was while Sita was in this mood of nostalgic melancholy that Hanuman caught sight of her.

As Hanuman sees Sita in a state of profound sadness, he is astonished at her state of unshakable chastity, modesty and noble

lineage. Rama's eyes had only enjoyed the charms of Sita while she was in joy. But now sad Sita, in her intense penance to keep her chastity inviolate, is a thousand times more charming. Hanuman muses, 'It is a pity it has not been given to Rama's eyes to see this noble spectacle.'

At this moment, Ravana comes into the presence of Sita, and Hanuman's mind swings to and fro in excited anguish.

Ravana stands humbly, cringingly, but at a respectable distance from Sita. Hanuman realizes that Ravana is afraid of approaching too close to the fire.

Ravana has an iron will and a steadfast mind, but in the presence of Sita, his sterner qualities give way. He tells Sita :

The citizenry of the three worlds
offers obeisance to me,
and I offer myself to you
as your slave.
Be gracious and accept me.

As soon as she hears these words, blood gushes out of Sita's eyes, and without looking at Ravana, she utters words which are charged with indignation :

If Mount Meru has to be pierced through,
if the sky has to be split up and crossed,
if the twice-seven worlds have to be destroyed,
the arrow of my lord can do it.
Learned Fool,
will you shed your ten heads
by uttering improper words ?
your ten heads and multitudinous shoulders
offer a fascinating target
for my expert archer to scatter his arrows about
and gaily play upon.
All the boons and the long life
you have procured by your tapas etcetera
may save you from Yama, the lord of Death,
but not from my hero's shaft.

As Ravana heard these words, 'the force of his wrath transcended even the force of Cupid'. In a mad fury, he left Asoka Vana for his palace. Hanuman was witnessing this thrilling scene

from the topmost branch of a tree and rejoiced that the lamp of Chastity was burning undimmed.

It was midnight now and Hanuman thought this was the proper time to meet Sita. As he climbed down from the tree, he found a number of giantesses sitting in a ring around Sita. They were so vigilant and watchful that they would alert the Goddess of Vigilance herself if she were to take a nap. Hanuman used his magic powers and cast a spell over them, and all of them went into a deep slumber. Seeing the unsleeping ones sleeping, Sita found herself utterly lonely, and fear and grief gripped her. The doubt assailed her if ever Rama would discover her and rescue her. Had he perhaps decided to discard her? Ultimately she resolved that to die was her duty. In this mood she entered a bower closed in with the thick foliage of Madavi creepers. At this moment, Hanuman, who guessed what she was about, rushed towards her and announced to her that he was the messenger of Rama. He convinced the incredulous Sita of his credentials by narrating to her certain incidents known only to Sita and Rama.

After narrating these incidents, which must have given Sita comforting evidence of Rama's tenderness for her, Hanuman handed over to Sita the signet-ring on which Rama's name was inscribed and said, 'Rama asked me to carry this safely and hand it over to you.'

At the sight of the ring, Sita grows ecstatic. Smelling it, she presses it close to her breasts; 'Good One,' said Sita to Hanuman, 'You have given me life. If I have a mind of spotless purity, you will live for Eternity, with all the vigour of today; surviving the disintegration of the fourteen worlds, and reckoning each epoch as a day, you will live for ever.' Sita wondered how with his small body Hanuman crossed the sea. In answer to her question, Hanuman assumed his enormous form (*Visva Rupa*). In a split second, he grew taller and taller, his shoulders spreading upwards, till he reached the roof of the sky, and crouched his figure, lest, growing taller, he should knock against the ceiling. This amazing demonstration dispelled Sita's doubts and gave her a sense of security. At Sita's command, Hanuman resumed his original size. Then, Sita complimented Hanuman by saying, 'Isn't it a slur on your gallantry that hostile Lanka was not situate far beyond the seven seas in order that you may prove your mettle!' A charming dialogue follows, in which Kamban delineates the alternation of

emotions which assail Sita's mind. Ultimately, she says to Hanuman, 'Tell my lord that I will wait for a month, and if he fails to rescue me within that time, tell him to perform my funeral rites with his sacred hands on the banks of the Ganges.' 'Remind him, too,' she added, 'Remind him, too, of his wedding-vow "I shall not in this birth touch another woman even with my mind".' After giving a reply, which moves and reassures Sita, Hanuman takes leave of her. At this juncture, Sita hands over her Choodamani (head ornament) to Hanuman to be safely delivered to Rama. Receiving her blessings, Hanuman leaves Asoka Vana, sets fire to Lanka, crosses the sea and returns to Rama.

Hanuman's Return

The Poet shifts the footlights now to Rama. Having sent a battalion of monkeys in search of Sita, Sugriva remains by the side of Rama, comforting him. As he is expressing his dismal doubts, a light flashes in the southern horizon. 'As if the Sun was rising in the South, Hanuman made his appearance.' On arrival, he saluted not the feet of Rama ; with his head facing towards Sita, he prostrated on the ground and started eulogizing her. 'Seen have I,' he declared, 'with mine own eyes, the ornament of Chastity in the sea-washed Island of Lanka. Lord of the Universe, dispel your doubts and your grief.' Rama is emotionally elevated by the magnificent description given by Hanuman of Sita's purity. Nothing more remains for him except to liberate Sita.

YUDDHA KANDA

The Canto of Battle

The Canto of Battle (Yuddha Kanda) now begins, with a scene in Lanka. After Lanka was set ablaze by Hanuman and burnt down, Ravana ordered it to be rebuilt. Lord Brahma, the Creator, prepared the architect's blue-print and in accordance with it, Maya, Heaven's mason rebuilt the City without any loss of time. Ravana, who felt humiliated by the destruction of the City by a monkey, went round and found that the rebuilt City was lovelier than the one that was burnt; he got over his anger and rejoiced. He convened his War Council in the newly built Durbar Hall.

The War Council

An awesome silence descended upon the Assembly as Ravana spoke from the throne about the destruction of his imperial prestige as a result of a monkey's antics. Commander after Commander stood up and advised Ravana to permit him to wage war against the enemy and exterminate him. At this stage, Kumbakarna, the younger brother of Ravana, stood up and said that he had put himself morally in the wrong by kidnapping Sita. Unlike Valmiki's Kumbakarna, who tells Ravana he would make a widow of Sita and make it easy for her to marry him, Kamban's Kumbakarna has a keen perception of right and wrong, though out of fraternal affection he is prepared to lay down his life for the sake of the erring Ravana.

Vibhishana, the youngest brother of Ravana, was on the opposite extreme of the spectrum. Not only was he the most enlightened among the three brothers but also was he an uncompromising champion of Virtue. He was so constituted that he would renounce ties of race, family and ego, in his eagerness to uphold Virtue. He stood up and delivered some home-truths to Ravana. 'The City and your glory were burnt down by the Chastity of Sita, the mother of the worlds. Don't you fancy it was a monkey which did the burning,' he said. He advised Ravana to restore Sita to her lord. His speech infuriated Ravana, who laughed uproariously. In a speech of ringing eloquence, he poured scorn

on Vibhishana, but Vibhishana, who was rooted in Truth, proceeded to quote the precedent of the mighty Hiranya, who was destroyed by Rama, in his previous incarnation as Narasimha. Ravana, who heard the impassioned speech of Vibhishana, jumped to the conclusion that he was in league with Rama and banished him from Lanka on pain of losing his life if he lingered there any longer. Sad Vibhishana left Lanka, after telling Ravana, 'Brother, I have given you advice which is good for your soul, but you heed me not; forgive me my fault.'

The Surrender of Vibhishana

Followed by four good-souled giants, Vibhishana crossed the sea and came to the place where Rama's monkey army was encamped. Some of the monkeys thought that a giant spy had come into their midst. Rama took counsel with his friends. Everyone except Hanuman opposed the proposal of accepting Vibhishana, the renegade. Hanuman commended Vibhishana's sense of justice, unbounded compassion and spiritual virtues. Turning to Sugriva and the other doubting warriors, Rama said, 'Marvellous is the utterance of Hanuman and the clarity and choice of his words! No matter if we win or lose, live or die, we should receive and accept the one who seeks refuge in us. The day I reject the one who seeks asylum from danger is the day of my death, and the day I die as a result of foul play by the refugee is the day from which I will live for ever.' Kamban takes this opportunity of expounding through Rama the gracious doctrine of surrender, according to which, God, in his infinite compassion, wipes out the sins of those who surrender to him without reservation, and absorbs them into his own stuff of Ananda.

At Rama's command, Sugriva goes out to receive Vibhishana. The pure hearts of the two mingle together at first sight and as white Sugriva embraces dark Vibhishana, the Poet says with characteristic audacity and inventiveness that it looks like the simultaneous embrace of Day and Night.

In an attitude of extreme devotion, he approaches Rama and as he sets eyes on Rama, he is bewitched by his loveliness. Vibhishana had been meditating upon Virtue as an abstract principle. Now, as he sees Rama, he feels that Virtue is something concrete. He asks in amazement, 'Is Virtue dark in complexion?' Rama reacts, without inhibition, to the boundless devotion of Vibhishana

and accepts him as his brother. 'With Guha we became brothers five', he says, 'later, with Sugriva we became six and with you, my loving friend, we have become seven. By giving me the precious forest, glorious Dasaratha, your father, has become replete with sons!' The Monkey Army rejoices at this adoption.

Nala, the engineer, is commissioned to build a bridge across the ocean to Lanka. By the command of Sugriva the monkey-warriors go in all directions and bring hillocks, boulders and pebbles from tens of miles away.

The bridge connecting Bharat with Lanka is now complete and Rama crosses the bridge along with his army and reaches Lanka. Rama sends Angada to deliver an ultimatum to Ravana, but he returns and reports to Rama, 'He will not remove from his mind his desire for Sita, unless his crowned head is cut asunder and removed from his body.'

The War Begins

The inevitable War begins. The Rakshasa battalions pour into the battle-field. So also the monkey battalions. As they prepare to accost each other, Ravana makes his appearance at the Front. Ravana's chariot is surrounded by huge giants armed with glittering weapons and shouting full-throated war-cries.

Rama rejoices that Ravana has personally come to the Front and given him a chance to accost him. His shoulders, which had become lean with pining for Sita, now swell with joy.

The fighting begins. Ravana fights, standing on his chariot, but Rama fights standing on the shoulders of Hanuman. Ravana's arrows are pulverized by those of Rama. Unable to face the ferocious shafts of Rama, the Rakshasa Army runs helter-skelter in all directions, leaving the lonely Ravana on his chariot. Rama sends some heavy sword-like arrows which pierce the joints of Ravana's chariot and break the chariot to pieces. Standing on the naked ground, Ravana continues to fight valiantly. One arrow breaks his bow and another shatters his sword. The third lifts the diadem off Ravana's head and flings it scornfully away. This was the most humiliating moment in Ravana's life. He stands humbled, with eyes downcast, with his toes scratching the ground, with his empty hands drooping spiritlessly like a tired banyan tree with its supporting roots sloping impotently to the ground.

Rama would not take advantage of Ravana's predicament.

Moved by pity, he generously spares the life of Ravana and asks him to come back for battle the next day. Ravana retreats to Lanka, and stretching himself on a bed, ponders over his plight. He cares not that his enemies would laugh him to scorn, but he wilts in shame at the thought that the red-lipped Sita would laugh at his defeat.

Then Ravana sends for Kumbakarna and tells him of his defeat and desires him to go to the battle-field and liquidate the enemy. Kumbakarna goes on to suggest that Ravana should give up Sita and surrender himself to Rama. This infuriates Ravana, who rises in fury and orders his chariot corps to be brought so that he may himself go to the Front and fight the enemy to the bitter end. Seeing this, Kumbakarna takes up his huge trident in his right hand and says, 'One word more and I am done. Destiny takes me by the scruff of the neck and pushes me forward. I will die, and if I die, my liege, do return Sita to Rama. It will be as good as victory.' His leave-taking is full of pathos. 'My King,' he says, 'forgive me all my sins. It is not given to me to see your face again. Farewell!'

The Conflict of Loyalties

Kamban, who has the incomparable knack of telling a story, takes us to Rama's war-camp and enables us to see the debut of Vibhishana, through the eyes of Rama. As Kumbakarna's chariot enters the battle-field, Rama tells Vibhishana, 'His figure is even more handsome than that of your eldest brother. Who may he be?' Rama ungrudgingly admires the personality of his opponent. He adds: 'Many a day will pass before the eye could, in one continual glance, survey him from one shoulder to another. And the body in between! Is it a mountain that possesses feet! He seems not a person itching for battle. Who is he?' Vibhishana tells Rama of the great qualities of Kumbakarna, of how he had admonished Ravana for his abduction of Sita. He tells him also of his great affection both for Ravana and Vibhishana. Rama, who is pleased to hear this report, asks Vibhishana to go to Kumbakarna and persuade him to come over to Rama's camp. Accordingly Vibhishana goes to Kumbakarna and salutes him. Kumbakarna embraces him and tells Vibhishana: 'I rejoiced that by joining sides with Rama, you are the one brother that will survive this holocaust. Tell me why you have shattered my hope and

come back to this camp like a muddle-headed one. By your great penance, you have secured a sense of justice, a knowledge of the posture of Virtue and a deathless life. Yet, are you unable, oh, Noble One, to free yourself from the baseness of our Rakshasa race?' Kumbakarna utters these words under a misapprehension that Vibhishana has forsaken Rama and come back to Ravana's camp. He adds, 'The Lord of all stands there, with his war-ready bow; all the others stand behind him; Death and Destiny stand there bent upon killing us; why did you renounce Rama and come back to those who stand already vanquished?' Vibhishana replies, 'The Lord of the Vedas himself has out of love sent me to you with a request. Brother, you never compromise with Virtue, and so, you must come along with me and join Rama.' Uttering these words, Vibhishana falls at the feet of Kumbakarna and entreats him to cross over. Kumbakarna knows that, unlike Vibhishana, he has been living in a plane of lower values and it would be cowardly and untrue to his own being to abandon Ravana and suddenly seek to fight for higher ideals. At the same time, Kumbakarna is able to perceive Vibhishana's lofty idealism and the sincerity of his purpose. He, therefore, thinks it will be in accord with his genius to fight against Ravana for the vindication of Virtue.

As Kumbakarna thinks of Ravana's great qualities, he goes into rhapsodies about them. Recalling these qualities, Kumbakarna movingly says:

'He is a hero without equal, without a foe,
His lofty shoulders have lifted up the huge Mount of Siva.
Is it proper that with those shoulders,
tied by vanquished Yama's lasso,
he should enter the land of Death,
all alone and unescorted?'

Kumbakarna is torn by a conflict of loyalties. He shifts his attention now to the welfare of Vibhishana, whom he loves as deeply as he loves Ravana. He tells him: 'Pause not here for a moment. Go back and seek Rama's friendship. Whatever must happen will happen at the time appointed for the happening. That which is doomed to destruction will, despite careful and close husbandry, be nevertheless destroyed. Who is there more clear-headed and perceptive than yourself? Go back without regrets. Pity us not, immortal Vibhishana.' Saying this, he takes him in

his arms again and clasps him to his bosom ; he stands and stands, and sighs and sighs, and fixing his full gaze upon him for long, he adds, ' With today snaps our fraternal tie.' Listening to these words, Vibhishana falls at the feet of Kumbakarna, his spirit shrinking with his body. Convinced that further debate is fruitless, he rises and leaves, the arms of the Rakshasa warriors around him going up in salutation to him. It may be noted in passing that in the Ramayana of Valmiki there is no encounter at all between these two brothers, the encounter stemming purely from a mixture of Kamban's intellectual daring and dramatic inventiveness.

Vibhishana reached Rama's camp and narrated to him all that had passed between Kumbakarna and himself. Rama resigned himself to the inevitable and permitted Lakshmana to give battle to Kumbakarna.

The Testament of Kumbakarna

Thousands gathered to witness the duel between the two illustrious warriors. Kumbakarna had no ideal to fight for ; his duty was to do and die. But Lakshmana was animated by a high purpose and he was therefore in high martial spirits. After a preliminary passage at arms, which is full of wit, sarcasm and repartee, a ferocious and long-drawn-out battle was waged, each outwitting the other and both becoming fatigued. Ultimately, Rama intervened, routed Kumbakarna's army and riddled Kumbakarna with his arrows. A blood stream, vermillion in colour, gushed across the battle-field, washing down the chariot corps, the elephant corps, the cavalry and the infantry of Kumbakarna. Charming Rama, with his lovely shoulders and bow, appears now before Kumbakarna, who lies maimed and mutilated. Addressing Rama, Kumbakarna makes his touching request in the interests of Vibhishana : ' My younger brother is grounded in the pervasive substance of Justice, which sprouts out of the Eternal Law. He knows not the lowly ways of caste and race. Oh! God that has come in the garb of a King! he has sought refuge in you and I beseech you to grant him asylum.' ' That merciless Ravana will give no quarter to Vibhishana, though he be his brother. He will kill him at first sight. Pray, grant me this boon, my lord, that he may throughout the battle be under the protecting wings of yourself or your brother or Hanuman.' With this request, which Rama grants,

dies Kumbakarna, the immortal creation of Kamban, who is marked by a high-souled heroism, an exquisite perception of justice and a tenderness of heart, very much unlike the grotesque Kumbakarna created by Valmiki. To Vibhishana we give our admiration, to Kumbakarna our tears.

Ravana's Grief

News of Kumbakarna's death plunges Ravana in grief. Irrate Adikaya, Ravana's son by Danyamalai, goes to the front to avenge the death of Kumbakarna. A huge army follows him. In an encounter with Lakshmana, Adikaya loses his head and dies.

Message of this ignominious defeat is carried by couriers to Ravana. The death of Adikaya raises in Ravana's mind intensely contradictory emotions :

Sobs raise his head,
 shame tilts its down,
 pity for the dead rouses his valour,
 surging rage and grief afflict the mind of Ravana,
 who stands, with tears gushing from his eyes,
 like the ocean, with its waves supporting one another,
 advancing farther and farther towards the shore
 then retreating farther and farther inwards.
 He thinks of lifting up the Earth ;
 He thinks of pulling down the Heavens ;
 He thinks of giving a simultaneous kick
 to the multitude of living things ;
 He thinks of splitting in twain
 all that bears the name of woman.

Superior Grief

Every one around Ravana is struck with awe by his frenzy. Kamban, with his unfailing sense of drama and his supreme knowledge of psychology, introduces bereaved Danyamalai into the scene at this juncture. She is one of the wives of Ravana and the mother of Adikaya, who has been killed in battle. Her intense grief over the death of her son puts the raging but guilty Ravana on the defence. Queen Danyamalai is a high-born lady, reared in the imperialist tradition. Even Ravana deferentially looks up to her. She comes beating her breasts violently with her hands.

She drops herself at the feet of Ravana and cries :

Pay heed can you to what you hearken ?

Hearken will you to what I utter ?

Show me, will you show me

my darling child,

who was the very iris of my eye.

All the vociferous fury of Ravana becomes stilled and muted in the presence of Danyamalai's superior grief. Danyamalai impeaches Ravana for the madness of his lust for Sita and warns him, 'Not a few are the evils that will come on Sita's account!' As she is wailing in this manner, Urvashi and Menaka, the celestial dancing maids in attendance on Ravana, take Danyamalai in their arms and carry her inside the palace.

Ravana next sends Indrajit, his most valiant son to the front. He resorted to a mysterious weapon called Brahmastra, a missile, which could discharge poison gas on the enemy and then return to the owner. He sent this missile at midnight while Rama, Lakshmana and their Army were fast asleep. The poison gas made them all unconscious and they were lying like dead. Indrajit went back exultantly to his palace and slept away.

On the advice of Jambavan, Hanuman sped to the Sanjeevi Hill, uprooted it and brought it. Inhaling the smell of the herbs on the hill, Rama, Lakshmana and the Army recovered consciousness. As Rama emerged out of his stupor, he saw the anxious face of Vibhishana and questioned him. Vibhishana explained how with the efforts of Hanuman, Rama, Lakshmana and the Army had been brought back to consciousness. At once, Rama gratefully embraced Hanuman.

Virtue Triumphs

The next day, Indrajit learnt that his subterfuge had failed. Egged on by Ravana, he fought a savage battle, in which Lakshmana severed his head with a crescent-shaped arrow. News of his death profoundly upset Ravana.

Ravana feels that Sita is at the bottom of all this catastrophe and in a fit of anger, he decides to kill Sita and runs towards Asoka Vana. Mahodara obstructs him, and tells him that if he kills Sita, he will incur everlasting infamy. He appeals to his innate love of chivalry and fame, and turns him away from his mad venture.

The delirium of Ravana's grief is now transformed into the delirium of war. In his encounter with Rama, he fights with prodigious heroism, but Rama's arrow severs his neck and lands his head on the ground. The valour and virtue of Rama triumph. Captive Sita is rescued. Vibhishana performs the funeral obsequies of the dead Rakshasas.

The victorious warriors set out towards Ayodhya along with Vibhishana, Sugriva and Hanuman.

Single Speech Satrugna

Meanwhile, Bharatha, who has been ruling the kingdom as Regent for fourteen anxious years, is daily looking southward for the arrival of Rama. Today the fourteenth year comes to a close. Bharatha climbs up a tower and looks southward, but sees no sign of Rama's arrival. Disappointed, he decides to fulfil his vow by leaping into the fire and perishing. At his command, his men make a big fire. He sends for the citizens and the sages, and tells them resolutely that he will not live a moment beyond the appointed time. Their attempts to dissuade him prove futile. At this juncture, Satrugna, the younger brother of Bharatha, arrives on the scene. Bharatha tells him, 'Today is the appointed day and Rama has failed to return. Before immolating myself, I make a request of you. You must rule this kingdom till Rama arrives and then hand it over to him.'

Satrugna is struck with self-disdain as he listens to these poignant words. He is a silent character who does not speak except once in the whole of Kamba Ramayana, and when he speaks, as he does now, Kamban puts into his utterance all the rhythmic sweetness at his command. A translation of the intellectual content of his utterance, but not its rhythm, may be given in the following words :

A brother is he, who went escorting the one,
 who, deserting the Earth-maid, went to rule over the jungle ;
 He is a brother, too, who stands resolved to give up his dear
 life
 because those who went have not returned in time.
 Standing apart, like an unconcerned spectator,
 am I to unblushingly rule over this kingdom !
 Sweet, indeed, is this blooming sovereignty !

The rhythmic pattern of the original of this poem is so contrived that the stress of every rhyme and alliteration falls just where the emotional stress falls. If we draw two graphs, one plotting the emotional intensities of Satrugna's speech, and another, the verbal, there would be such a perfect synchronisation between the two, trough for trough and crest for crest, that the original song in Tamil is rightly regarded as a marvel of poetic achievement.

The Coronation

The citizens of Ayodhya stand baffled by the pathetic predicament of Satrugna and the resolute unvacillating determination of Bharatha. Just at this moment, Hanuman comes rushing to the scene, shouting, 'Rama is come!' With his hands he reduces the big fire to ashes and claps his hands and dances with joy. The good news of Rama's arrival throws Bharatha into ecstasy. He acts like one mad. He salutes all those around him, he salutes his servant-maids, he salutes his own self. His joy so intoxicates him that the Poet makes the reflection :

This thing called Love
is, verily,
a distillate of wine!

In a short while, Rama, Lakshmana and Sita arrive along with Vibhishana, Sugriva and the monkey Army. The whole of Ayodhya is plunged in joy. To the accompaniment of instrumental music, the Coronation of Rama takes place.

CONCLUSION

Hardly any justice could be done in this tiny monograph to the Epic of Kamban, which consists of over ten thousand songs. Throughout the Epic, he speaks with the assurance and self-surrender of one, who has discovered the controlling centre of life. Take, for instance, the Hiranya Vadai Padalam, in which he creates an intensely original dramatic situation. In this scene, Brahma, the creative aspect of God, confronts Vishnu, the Ultimate Reality, and conducts a cosmic dialogue with Him. At the invocation of Prahlada (the son of Hiranya), God breaks asunder the shell of the Macrocosm and after shattering the roof of the Cosmos, descends to the Earth in human form with a lion's head before the unbelieving Hiranya, and red in tooth and claw, destroys him. As Narasimha (Man-Lion) is roaring in infinite fury, Kamban, with his sense of exquisite artistry and humour, introduces Brahma into the scene in an attempt to appease the Lion of Heaven. In accents of great devotion, not unmixed with loving irony, Brahma exclaims :

By precipitating Thyself in this form,
Oh! Lord of Lords,
Thou hast proved
that Thou must have created Thyself!
But, by indulging in this act of self-creation,
My Lord,
Hast Thou not encroached upon my jurisdiction
and set at nought Thy purpose in creating me
for creating the multitudinous forms!

There is more devotion than logic in the mock complaint of Brahma that the Sovereign, who has power to delegate his jurisdiction, has no power to trench upon it. But there is truth in the following charge that Brahma levels against his Principal :

The myriad stars and planets
linger in Thy Primordial Substance
like the unlingering bubbles in the Arctic seas ;
Thou art the myriad forms,
but, alas! by assuming this singular form,

Hast Thou not needlessly imposed
a narrowing constraint
upon Thy Infinite plurality!

After demonstrating the incongruity between the infinity of God and the unflattering finitude of his manifestation, Brahma brings out the paradox between God's immanence and God's transcendence in the following words :

I have no existence outside Thee ;
without Thy Grace, I can create neither life nor matter ;
I can exist neither before nor after ;
I am like a goldsmith
born inside Thy golden substance,
shaping that substance
with Thy Grace.

Thus does Kamban argue metaphysics with his Maker in a series of poems, which, in the amplitude and boldness of their vision, in the sweep of their reverential humour and pathos, and in the overwhelming splendour of their poetry and dramatic power can equal the best in the literatures of the world. The implications of Advaitic thought bewilder the intellect of those, who live in this world of relativity, but the poetic instinct of Kamban, while dramatizing and concretizing this bewilderment, accepts and uses this very bewilderment as convincing proof of the truth of Advaita.

The success achieved by Kamban is due not so much to what he says as to how he says it. Each word of his is a focus of persuasive energy, in which his living faith is transformed into the vibrations of the human voice. And those, who wish to expose themselves to these vibrations, must listen to the songs of Kamban in the original and not to the feeble and uncreative vibrations of the translator.

To Kamban, life is not a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing. To him, life is full of significance, order and dignity. The source of Kamban's art is a boundless sympathy for all things, animate and inanimate. He has a vision of life as but a passing though necessary stage in a cosmic journey and he interprets the events of earthly life as effects of causes originating before birth and as having effects on the life beyond the grave. He, therefore, delves deeper, deeper into life ; he digs deeper and deeper into the Eternity of the past and the Eternity

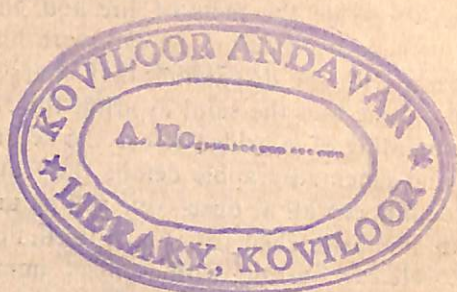
of the future in the consciousness that Man is but part of an ageless continuum. This enables him to gaze fixedly at the phantasmagoria of life, to bring the different segments of life into harmony and to interpret the whole in the light of a profound optimism and insight. This vision gives Kamban a certitude and we can say of Kamban, what Emerson said of Plato, that from the Sun-like centrality of his vision, he had a faith without a cloud.

This does not mean that Kamban is a heavy-footed meta-physical poet or a propagandistic hawker of religious wares. His roots are in the real world of character and situation and his epic takes in its stride the facts of life and Nature. Describing the aridity of a parched desert, he can, with his tongue in his cheek, compare it with the dispassion that characterizes alike the common prostitute and the saint aspiring for Jivan Mukti. Describing the building of a bridge across the ocean, he can mention with loving and cinematographic details the feats of a monkey carrying three hillocks all at once—one rolling under its heels, another borne in its upstretched arms and a third, firmly held in its looped-up tail. He can narrate, with a gift of immediacy, and a sense of personal involvement, a hundred battles, each conceived and executed on a different pattern from the rest, and all packed with thrill, suspense and intense tempo. As a connoisseur of the human heart, he can reveal the most secret springs of human action. He can neutralize the stiffness of the Epic with the suppleness of Drama and suffuse both with the glow of his lyrical intensities.

Whatever he does, he manages to sustain in the reader a feeling of passionate intimacy with things that count. He drives the reader to dip himself again and again in the cleansing waters of his *Ramayana* and to emerge with a warmer idealism, with a sense of keener personal participation in the upholding of Virtue, with a sharper sensitivity to what is beautiful, good or true, with a greater courage to put the ultimate questions and an easier confidence to tackle them.

And all this he achieves through his supreme gift of poetry. Kamban's rhythm has an unrivalled fullness, variety and sufficiency. He manipulates his vowel and consonantal sounds with such dexterity and magic that they bring out the astral form of any mood or emotion. And his rhythmic inventions have the effect of hushing the chattering mind of the reader and keeping it receptive to the message of the Poet, undistracted by the pressures of

the private will. All this manipulation bears the imprimatur of unlaboured spontaneity and does not betray the pre-verbal agony of poetic creation. While describing some deep inexorable purpose behind the Cosmos or while conveying some glimpse of the inner chambers of existence, his rhythm effectively prolongs the moment of contemplation. Such indeed is the *attar* of Kamban's poetry that by common consent of the Tamils, Kamban has been rightly acclaimed as Kavi Chakravarti or the Emperor of Poetry.



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